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THE IDLE COUNTRYMAN

To
MY DEAR BROTHER
LOVED COMPANION OF THE HAPPY YEARS



The Pillar of the Temple

THE IDLE COUNTRYMAN

by
'BB'

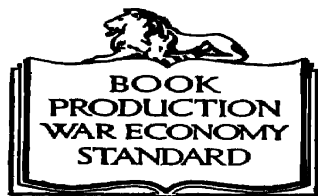
Illustrations by
D. J. WATKINS-PITCHFORD



*The wonder of the world, the beauty and the power, the shapes of
things, their colours, lights, and shades; these I saw.
Look ye also while life lasts*

1943
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Introduction

This book is a complete record of a year in the heart of the country; it is, in a sense, a mirror of the four seasons. Each day that I have seen something of interest I have set it down. Many of these descriptions are of my solitary vigils and wanderings in the woods. Some of my most interesting experiences have been at twilight, when I have been waiting for the pigeons to come in to roost.

It is astonishing how few people have any love, or knowledge, of Nature, and who regard anyone who chooses to wander alone in the woods at nightfall as either a madman or a rogue. As soon as the sun sets the average countryman hastens home to his well-lit house and cosy fire-side. But it is then that interesting things begin to happen. The four-footed people of the woods leave their lairs and go a-hunting, the queer macabre owls drift away from the hollow trees and begin their 'day'. One's nerves must be strong to remain alone in the woodlands after darkness has fallen.

When the sun has gone down, and the sky is clear of cloud, a curious unearthly light, quite different from daylight when the sun is high in the sky, illuminates the trees and bushes. Everything is changed and one's surroundings take on a dream-like aspect.

Anyone who has kept dogs may have noticed that at twilight they become unusually alert. They sit listening intently, with ears cocked, to every tiny sound. I get this same feeling at approach of night, I instinctively hold my breath and walk as silently as possible. At times I have been seized with a nightmare fear. Once, in a windy gloaming, during the month of March, I was in the middle of a very lonely cover. Above the sound of the uneasy trees I heard a curious moaning squeak which attracted my attention. It was only an old thorn tree complaining in the wind, far away in the wilderness of thorn and scrub. But that solitary tree, groaning aloud to itself in the heart of that desolate place, filled me with an indescribable sense of panic. I turned and ran out of the wood like a scared buffalo.

I have come across other instances of this sudden panic in people. Many have experienced it when alone among the hills or on the moors. It is by no means an uncommon phenomenon for mountain climbers. It is as though the wilderness becomes suddenly hostile, one feels as if it resents your presence and would do you harm. There is something primeval in this feeling, which is born in the subconscious mind.

But my best experiences have not always been sombre, nor have they occurred at the edge of dark. There was that exquisite, almost unearthly,

dance of the swallows, and the motionless hare, crouched in the centre of the Druidical circle. Both these events are described later in this book. To the unimaginative and the unobservant many happenings such as these would appear quite commonplace and ordinary. But the eye, trained to observe narrowly, reads deeper.

I feel unutterably thankful that I have had this past year to enjoy the world of Nature. Though, at the moment of writing, the great storm which beats with such fury round the world has not yet burst in full violence upon our own shores, we see the horizon is dark whichever way we turn, baleful lightning jumps along the seas' rim. At any moment the tempest may break upon us. But in the darkest hour the mind can turn to the world of nature, to memories of soft night stealing across lonely uplands, of summer dawns and dusks in English woodlands.

There indeed is to be found that 'peace which passeth all understanding', which is part of our heritage, and for which even life itself is not too big a price to pay.

'B B'

May, 1943

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CHAPTER I

Spring

May 26th, 1941. A backward spring. Birds in the garden

It has been a backward spring. I do not think I ever remember the blackthorn flowering so late, I saw some in its prime today. Until it goes we shall not see the warm weather. Many of the old country sayings are very true, the 'blackthorn winter' is as constant as St. Luke's summer.

I can only recall three really warm days since early March; for the rest—grey skies and bitter winds with much rain. Yet for all the lack of sun the lusciousness of the new foliage is unimpaired, the hedges and trees thicken every day. I planted some birches in my garden last November, beautiful six-year-olds. They have the silver stems of adult trees and I am enthralled when I see the new green leaves unfolding. Some are more forward than others, possibly because I took more care in the planting. One is in full leaf, though each leaf has not of course fully expanded. We are too apt to think that once a leaf has burst its casing and opened, that it is mature. All leaves are at first small and undersized, even those of the handsome horse chestnut, but in a little while they swell and grow, exactly like the wings of a newly hatched butterfly. It will be a month before all are fully opened.

I wonder whether many other people take the same delight as I do in watching trees grow and leaves unfold. Flowers and plants do not affect me in the same way, though I am interested in them. Trees, no matter what species, as long as they are 'wild', have a very great attraction. I like to see the sturdy green central rods of the conifers thrusting up, each separate branch tipped with a brilliant green point on which sits the little hat-like husk of the bud casing. Gradually this brilliant green creeps back along the branches until the whole tree is freshly clad from top to toe in a bright new dress.

I see the ferns, too, are thrusting up under the birches. A few days ago there was nothing to be seen but the dead stalks of yester year and the rufous hairy croziers. Now the earth is pushed aside, in one or two cases a clod is hoisted up, giving a wonderful impression of the power of growing things; the earth is full of this life force which will not be denied.

It is strange to see the way trees and running water attract birds. Before I installed my stream, fed by an electric motor close to the rockery pool, and prior to planting the trees, few birds came. But this spring a blackbird built in an ivy-clad arch nearby and safely reared a brood (she had eggs by March 21st), a greenfinch has built in an old ash stump, and now a chaffinch has built its nest in the plum tree under my dressing room; I have only to open the window and lean out and I can touch the back of the brooding hen. All these birds have been frequenting the garden most of the winter.

The blackbird family amused me. Whilst the hen was sitting the male mounted guard and sometimes, when she tried to sneak off her eggs for a 'breather', or a stretch and bath in the rockery pool, he flew after her and pursued her all over the place, giving her no peace until she returned to the nest. But she turned the tables on her spouse. When the young hatched and could fly, the hen left the feeding of them to him and began at once to build another nest within a foot of the first. She seemed to have lost all interest in her family and the male had all his time taken up in looking after the five hungry youngsters which followed him about wherever he went.

The hen did not, however, lay in this second nest. She worked feverishly for three days, in which time the nest was completely finished and lined, then the urge left her and she took no more interest in it.

Birds seem to take much longer to build their nests earlier in the year; later, when the weather is warm and leaves are on the trees, they can build and complete a nest, like my hen blackbird, in a very few days.

All kinds of birds now visit my garden. As there is no other pond or stream within half a mile they appreciate the water. True, there is the infant Avon which flows under the bridge at the bottom of the village street, in which the steel helmeted soldiers wash their sullen tanks and camouflaged lorries, but no other garden has water in it. The truth is that birds are most sociable creatures. They love human companionship if left alone. And if they are shewn hospitality they become delightful friends, pleasant little people whose cheery presence brings much happiness to me. They are so in love with life and demonstrate their unbounded happiness with song and action. As I mentioned in a former book, I have a robin which comes regularly for a bath all the year round. Dusk seems to be his favourite time and no matter how cold the weather he comes. Even on the darkest winter's day I see him having his nightly tub before 'turning

in'. This fact, when you consider it for a moment, is rather extraordinary. On a cold and frosty night it must take him some time to dry.

I have notes of the following visitors to my garden since the trees were planted and the pool installed. Wood pigeon, Robin, Willow Warbler, Chiff Chaff, Wood Wren, Wren, Spotted Flycatcher, Blackbird, Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Chaffinch, Redwing, Fieldfare, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Cole Tit, Marsh Tit, Goldfinch, Sparrow, Hedge Accentor, Hawfinch (an extremely rare bird in the parish), Blackcap, Whitethroat, Bullfinch, Green Finch, Pied Wagtail, Greater Spotted Woodpecker, Yellow Wagtail, Tree Creeper, and one bird I could not identify, which resembled a hen Wheatear. All these birds, twenty-nine known species, had a bathe, with the exception of the Wood pigeon, Redwing, Tree creeper and Fieldfare.

For some obscure reason, all the goldfish in my pool, save one, have died. It may be because I introduced other fish, carp, roach, and perch, the latter rather rashly, I fear, though they were only fingerlings, or perhaps goldfish do not thrive in running water.

It is not yet buttercup time, though the buds are forming. Golden dandelions line the roadsides and regiments of wild parsley are pushing up. These will form an unbroken white band along the hedgeside when they are in flower. I will take careful note when I consider the tide is at the full, for this green wealth of foliage resembles a tide which, day by day, I see rising higher and higher. The cuckoos call continuously now from the tall elms over the meadow. I hear them as soon as it gets light and they call for hours on end. When the sun has fully risen they get themselves off to the fields and copses; the village stirs, the labourers go out to work, and the real bustle of the day begins. Homing bombers wing in from the west (one I saw yesterday had a large ragged hole in one wing, reminding me of an old crow whose flight feathers had been damaged by shot), the village cocks crow one against the other.

There is a footpath across the field in front of my house, a short cut, and jealously guarded 'right of way'. It is stiled in two places and connects the old hamlet with the new 'Council houses'. It is a pleasant field, soon to be gold with buttercups. Every evening I see William Webber, the wooden-legged cowman, come slowly across, bound for the Drover's Arms and his nightly pint, or pints. Two hours later I see him return, swaying slightly from side to side, reminding me of a squat drifter making heavy weather. He heads out across the meadow, slowly dwindling into the dusk, the reek of his shag, like smoke from a funnel, hanging long behind him. High overhead the swifts scream (they arrived on May Twelve), hurling themselves about in sooty companies, whirling and twisting about the thatch, screeching altogether like dusky devils. When one ponders a moment on

these birds, they must be descendants of others which have visited and bred in the village for countless generations. This also applies to the jackdaws and rooks, though the latter are dependent on suitable trees for breeding. Year after year they return to the same hole in the wall and the same thatch. Were I to return in a hundred Mays from now there would still be jackdaws popping in and out of the slatted lancets in the old church tower and perching on the grinning gargoyles which, in midwinter, dribble long icicles from their hideous mossy jaws.

But the way of man seems so dark, so wrapped in peril and uncertainty, I do not think of the future. What a blessed relief it is to turn to the birds and the green earth, and know the stability of natural things!

May 27th. Black Devils

CECILY and I took Sparkie, the spaniel, to Wildwood this afternoon. From a lowering sky steady lines of rain fell unceasingly, pattering on the freshly opened leaves, and knocking the wild hyacinth heads. We hoped for an odd pigeon or two, wartime knows no close season for pigeon, but the trees are now so thick in leaf it is hard to see a bird if it does come up. The clap of its wings may be heard, that is all.

It is quite amazing how the woods thicken as the leaves unfold, veils of green appearing where you least expect them. Sparkie was on our left as we came down the ride, pushing happily about among the brambles. Glancing in her direction I saw her suddenly stop and lower her head, looking intently past me as though at some invisible creature. Slowly her face changed, her usual benign expression gave place to one of the most abject terror. It was as though she had suddenly seen some fearful demon walking with us. Her tail went down, her hackles rose like hedgehog's spines, straight on end, and with a blood curdling howl, which sent shivers down my back, she fled away pell-mell through the underwood. For some time we heard her tearing about among the thickets; she was charging blindly she knew not where. Once, as we stood silently in the ride, we saw her dash across the narrow path as if all the devils in Hell were at her heels and then there was silence. After waiting a little while, and whistling and calling, I went the length of the wood in search of her, pushing my way through the dripping thickets. But there was no trace. On the pool I surprised a mallard duck with her brood of striped babies, and they all swam away under the willows.

I was very worried. Dogs, when seized with the 'Black Devils', will sometimes travel for miles and are never heard of again. This hysteria is a most uncanny thing and seems to be much more prevalent than formerly. The affected dog does, I am sure, see things, fearful monsters of the most frightful aspect, which pursue them. Even their loved ones are trans-

figured They are blind and deaf to all external things whilst the fit is on them.

When we got home we found her in the kitchen, wet through and very exhausted, but more or less recovered. This is the second attack she has had. The first one occurred four years ago, after she had pups. I think it is generally known that under nourishment is one of the contributory causes and for some time the poor beast has had to subsist on baked brown bread as dog biscuits are unobtainable.

Speaking of dogs and their ways reminds me that I noticed a very curious thing about my labrador a few days ago.

She was lying asleep before the fire and someone was chopping parsley in the distant kitchen. Her breathing kept time to the sound of chopping, no doubt it was woven into the fabric of her dreams.

28th. Migration of swifts

SITTING in a little garden on the outskirts of Northampton this afternoon I witnessed a migration of swifts. The sun was shining and a magnificent skyscape was spread out in the west, mighty columns and bastions of cloud were illuminated by the bright rays in a most theatrical way. I do not think I have ever had such a sense of perspective in the sky. In the foreground was an immense cloud pillar and looking past its left shoulder the eye penetrated into upper space where faint wisps of cirrus floated, at a considerably higher altitude than the main cloud mass.

Soon I saw a single swift flying past at about a hundred yards distance. At first I hardly heeded it. Swifts, being sociable birds, are always found near towns and villages. Indeed, it is one of the few birds which seems to have benefited by the march of civilization, they prefer the streets and houses to the clean open countryside. You will seldom see swifts far from the dwellings of man, and the same applies, in a lesser degree, to swallows and martins.

Then, in a moment, I saw another and yet another, all flying in the same direction, namely due east. They appeared to be following exactly the same line, over three young oak trees growing in the distant hedge. The wind was easterly and they were flying against it all the time.

During the next hour small parties kept passing, all swifts, not a swallow or a martin amongst them.

Turning to the west, where the light was dazzlingly bright, others could be seen, at first as mere specks far away over the house tops. They hawked about from side to side, catching flies as they flew. I have noticed all the swallow family do this on migration. At first, idly looking at them, the unobservant naturalist would never guess the birds were on migration. They were proceeding in such a leisurely manner, and one would imagine

that they fly very many extra miles to no purpose. Not one of the swallow family appears to be able to fly on a dead straight course, like the starling or the pigeon, or in the larger birds, the ducks and geese. Looking at these swifts passing over the sunlit oaks I thought what a wonderful and mysterious urge the migratory instinct must be. Those other specks, appearing in the far distance, were following a set course as mathematically correct as any bomber pilot. They could not see their companions, passing even now over the oak trees, yet they were on the same line. Occasionally there was a lull and then, after ten minutes or so, more appeared, still unerringly following the route of their predecessors. And I wondered, as I watched these scythe-winged dusky crescents which are lords of all the air, if my companion and I were the only two people to notice this romantic passage. Perhaps not one person in the whole town besides ourselves would have guessed the birds were on migration.

On looking at the map I speculated whither they were bound. They had evidently come in by the West coast route and were possibly bound for either Finland or Norway. I do not think they were home-bred birds. Possibly they had come up from South Africa or South Europe, following the coastline and crossing the Bay of Biscay. It is known that large numbers of swifts *do* pass across England on their spring migrations. This has been proved by ringing. At the end of the garden was an old tortoise enjoying the sun. He had spent the winter in a box filled with hay close by and was now out taking the air and feeling the first heat of summer on his horny shell. And suddenly I was aware, that compared to the swifts (those miniature sooty cross-bows) I was very like this slow-moving, half-aware tortoise, chained and bound to the earth, weighed heavily with domestic cares and responsibilities which resembled the heavy domed shell which the tortoise carried on his leathery back. Oh, to be up and away with the swifts over the sunlit trees, to feel the wind and see the cloud shadows chasing across the patterned fields and hamlets, to see the blossoming orchards and contented farms, to taste of the adventure and freedom which was theirs!

The gigantic and futile struggle in which we are engaged was mocked by these winged sky gipsies. Before long they would see the wide ocean, patched, as was the land, with moving cloud shadow, amethyst, zircon, and green, spread out below them like a wonderfully coloured crinkled plain, and laced here and there with white foam caps. And by this time tomorrow they might even be across the North sea in view of the dark pine forests of Northern Europe.

I think most of us get this 'wander pain' more strongly when we are young and full of life and vitality. I, too, would like to see again the pine forests of Lithuania, the marshes smoking with mist below Memel, the

bone-white beaches stretching for hundreds of miles along the Baltic sea. I remember gazing at those far white beaches from the deck of a German cargo boat and smelling, even at the distance of three miles or more, the fragrant breath of the pines, a turpentiney scent which mingled oddly with the smell of the sea. Queen of Spain fritillaries play about those dunes and Camberwell Beauties glide among the dark and shadowed glades. Tomorrow, the next day, perhaps, the swifts will see these things and come at last to the city of their choice. Perhaps though, I was wrong, and all my romantic speculations were false, perhaps their companies would soon split up into pairs and breed in Britain.

29th. Strange story of a heron

COMING home late tonight from a walk round my shoot I surprised a family of wild ducklings with their mother. They were in a little brooklet and when the duck saw me she crawled up the bank close by and hid under a root, calling her babies to her. They obeyed at once, burrowing into her feathers, and I stood within three feet of them watching them out of the corner of my eye. The duck was watching me and I had to pretend I had not seen her.

One chubby-faced youngster poked its little striped head out from under her scapulars. Before the summer is over carrion crow and other vermin will have taken heavy toll of that happy family and I doubt whether five ducklings out of the eleven I saw would survive.

As it grew dusk a heron croaked as he winged his way up the darkling valley, his huge wings with their cupped vanes seemed to move slowly, yet in actual fact the bird was travelling at a good pace. Speaking of herons reminds me that I once had a very interesting experience with one of these strange plumed birds. I was on a holiday in Scotland and towards dusk one night we began to cast about for some place to camp. At last we came to a little meadow close to a burn. It was a wild spot far from any house and sheltered on both sides by high bracken covered hills. We pitched our tent close to an old stone bridge and while Jock, my companion, cooked the supper, I went for a stroll up the burn to gather firing.

Before very long I came to a bend in the bank where there was a low mound which overhung the water in a steep bluff. On looking over I immediately saw a heron standing with his back to me in the shallow water just below. His head was sunk in his shoulders and he seemed asleep, or unusually intent on his fishing. As a general rule the heron is both quick of sight and hearing and it is very seldom one can get so close.

To my complete astonishment this bird never moved but continued to gaze into the stream. I climbed down the bank as quietly as I could and stole up behind him over the short grass. Then very gently I stretched out

my hand and actually stroked his back! My gentle caress did not at first rouse him, but after I had passed my hand down his back several times, he suddenly sensed something was happening. His neck shot up, his round fierce eye glared into mine with an expression of utter astonishment and horror. Then with a loud 'squawrk' he spread his huge wings and sailed away.

He must, I think, have been digesting an exceptionally heavy meal and was possibly asleep. I can safely say that never again shall I have the experience of stroking a truly wild heron in its natural surroundings. I can never overcome the feeling that somehow this bird appears strangely out of place in the English countryside, it seems too ornamental and artificial. I do not know why I should feel like this, but the heron, to my mind, seems to belong to tropical rivers, along with spoonbills and pelicans. Not long ago a village woman told me in an excited voice that she had seen a tame stork standing by the brook below the hamlet. I soon found, of course, that she had seen a heron.

When I told her what it was she was astonished that such a distinguished-looking bird could be really 'wild'. She must have seen herons scores of times, but never before had seen one close at hand. Another instance of rustic ignorance occurs to me. Not long ago I visited a particularly charming village in the valley of the Ouse. I was after butterflies and had in my pocket a small book which gave accurately coloured plates of all the British Butterflies. As I walked beside the river (it was a hot afternoon in June) I met an old man with a rake over his shoulder. We got into conversation and as he seemed intelligent I began to ask him whether he had seen any unusually beautiful butterflies along the river. I particularly described the Swallow Tail, a specimen of this insect having been captured by a friend of mine near this very spot many years before.

I showed him the coloured plate and after glancing at it he said 'Why yes, scores on 'em! Them things are common along the reeds, I see one or two every day when the sun's out'. I got him to describe the insect to me. True, he seemed somewhat vague, but he insisted that the butterfly he had seen had long pointed wings with tails, yellow and black, and with beautiful eyes on each hind wing. He was so positive I naturally became very excited. 'We calls 'em Devil's Needles round 'ere, they sting an' all, you maun 'andle 'em.'

And then I knew to what insect he was referring. Devil's Needle is the country name for a dragonfly. Yet he had seen the picture in the book and was quite indignant when I suggested that what he had described were only dragonflies.

'I can see ye don't believe me,' he said, looking intently at my face, 'but ask any o' the village children, they 'ave lots o' Devil's Needles set up proper in the school.'

It is amazing that people who have lived all their lives in the country, who have played as children in the fields and woods, should be so ignorant of natural history. Yet it is really true that this ignorance arises from being unobservant. Most small boys are shockingly unobservant, and I remember it was so in my own case. I have often wondered whether the average villager loves the country; I believe they would be much happier in a town where they could go to the 'pictures' and see more bustle and life. Perhaps one reason for this lack of observation is that they have no time to 'stand and stare', as my old friend W. H. Davies has it, their eyes are on the ground guiding the plough or digging the soil. Perhaps it is only idle countrymen like myself who can study and appreciate nature. Yet some village characters I have met have shown great intelligence and appreciation of natural history and have shown profound learning. Keepers, of course, whose job it is to watch their masters' policies, automatically acquire a store of natural history knowledge, yet some keepers are ignorant of some of the most simple facts. Such men can never make good keepers because they *are* unobservant. The man who is a good naturalist will serve his master better.

Round about this parish badgers are numerous, I have some on my own shoot. The damage they do infant rabbits is great. I heard of a case only the other day of a badger which was killed at Rockingham Castle, whose stomach contained no less than *forty eight* young rabbits, all about four inches long.

31st. Summer Woodlands

THIS humid overcast weather continues, with frequent showers of fine rain, different weather indeed to last May when we had so much sun.

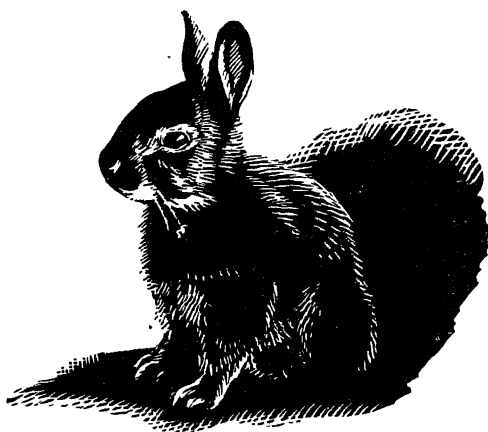
There has been less bird song this season than usual, due no doubt to the lack of sunshine. The ash trees are beginning to break their buds, though some, in exposed positions, are still in their winter nakedness. The old saying, 'Ash before Oak a reg'lar Soak' is entirely false. The ash *never* comes into leaf before the oak.

Re-reading Hudson's *Nature in Downland* I am struck by the fact that Sussex, and indeed all the downland country, has so much more character than the midlands. In the main, Northamptonshire lacks character, but it has some redeeming features, namely the great oak woods and ancient forests. It is possible that before long I shall be resuming my annual forest wanderings in search of the Purple Emperor (*Aputura Iris*) though petrol restrictions will naturally curtail many expeditions.

What a pity it is that so few oaks are planted these days! The conifers, being of quicker growth, are planted in their stead; we do not plant for future generations as the old landowners did. Mercifully the demand for

timber is not so great as formerly. In the last German War thousands of acres of our finest woodlands were felled for pitprops and trench boarding. The scars of the last conflict are still evident, though Nature endeavours to hide them, covering the untidy wastes with masses of willow herb. This latter plant has increased tremendously since the last war, at one time it was comparatively local in England.

A foxhunting country can never be beautiful save in the eyes of the foxhunter. Large woods are a nuisance because it is hard to get a fox away from a big cover and the tall straggling hedges I love so much are unsuitable for jumping.



CHAPTER II

Summer

June 1st. A visit to the old Rectory

At last the sun shines; we seem about to take a headlong plunge into summer. With the ground so moist after the continued rain plants are growing with almost tropical speed.

Cecily and I paid a visit to my old home, a really old fashioned country rectory. The house, architecturally perfect and figured in 'The lesser Country houses of Northamptonshire' (Gotch), is little changed, but owing to lack of labour the garden is becoming a wilderness sad to see. The long kitchen garden wall is breached in many places by the frost, the lawns, once shaven, are ankle deep in grass and weeds, the tennis lawn gay with cuckoo pint.

And yet, walking round those dear familiar haunts, I found the bird population the same as ever. There is the usual starling's nest in the gable of the 'Parish room'. Starlings have built there for at least forty years which means that some two hundred starlings have been born in that site alone. The parent birds were flying by the same route, up from the paddock, over the tennis lawn, round the big holly where the woodpigeons coo in the early mornings, across the woodyard, and up to the lime-splashed gable. The speeding shape was seen, passing with direct and bee-like flight, bill wedged wide asunder with a bundle of wire worms, and when I stood on the lower lawn I could hear the sudden chorus of the baby birds as the parent alighted on the peak of the gable, the tremulous 'churr churr' which becomes richer and deeper in tone as the birds grow their feathers.

There was another starling's nest in the gable of the stable. This site is a hollow behind some bricks, one course below the very peak of the gable, and the only entrance a narrow chink just wide enough to receive a squeezed starling's body. Every time they enter there is a prolonged struggle, and I have sometimes seen the bird firmly wedged in the crevice, unable to move either forwards or back. By the time the young can fly the parents have worn away most of their breast feathers, yet they still return year after year to the same site. As soon as the starling brood is safely launched, house sparrows take possession and one year, I remember, a swift became the tenant.

Standing in the old nutwalk, where we used to catch the splendid red admiral butterflies in August (they came to an old plum tree growing over the wall) other starlings could be seen continuously passing up from the meadow below, bound for other nesting sites in the park, flying as direct as wasps to their nests. Everywhere was a smell of steaming vegetation, all was so rich and new. But banks of nettles choke the handsome peony bushes, the hazel bough bends low over the mossy green path, brushing the cheek. In an old apple-tree a spotted flycatcher had her nest, like the starling she returns year after year to this hole in the apple stump. The lily pool is choked with weed but a portly goldfish still shakes the lily pads as it dives down at our approach.

The tool shed was unchanged. I must write of this shed because as a small boy I spent many happy hours there, my enjoyment being heightened by the fact that it was forbidden ground.

It was the Holy of Holies of Gunn the gardener. It faces the woodyard where one day my brother and I laid the body of a dead vixen which we had found in the Marsh. We fetched Gunn, breathless, from his asparagus bed, and indicated with many excited whispers the seemingly sleeping fox. On tiptoe he fetched a massive baulk of timber from the woodshed and smote the fox a resounding blow, and then departed blaspheming. 'Call yerselves young gentlemen!' he flung at us. . . .

The roof of the tool shed was once tiled but is now of corrugated iron. Its one small window at the northern end was filmed and clouded with countless generations of spiders webs. Within all was aromatic gloom, fragrant with all manner of smells which made the place even more entrancing.

Various implements hung on the walls, gleaming spades and forks, rakes and hoes, all hung neatly on their hooks driven into the flaky plaster. On the right hand side of the door, as you entered, was the door to the loft above and this was always locked. But one glorious summer afternoon I found where Gunn hid the key, under a small flowerpot on a high shelf above the door. Many a time after this discovery I opened the padlock

and crept up the narrow winding stair. On each step Gunn stored those treasures which were dearest to his heart, the principal gem in the whole collection being a very ancient single muzzle-loading gun with a slightly belled mouth. Where he acquired this monstrous fowling piece I do not know, but he had brought it with him from his former 'place'.

Up above was the loft, used as a drying ground for the yearly onion crop, and the gloom was full of their pungent odours. There was only one window to light this place, barely two feet square, and even that source of light was partly screened by ivy growing outside. In June it was possible to see the blossoming top of the lilac tree in the kitchen garden, a very fine double-flowered variety. It grew just over the wall, next to the pointed arched door of ecclesiastical cut, which led into the Nutwalk.

We used to set mouse traps in the corner under the sloping cobweb-draped rafters and sometimes we would wait with the air gun, after scattering small pieces of bread about the floor as bait.

In that remote place one was secure from the world of governesses, lessons, and visitors; there one could gleefully lie hid and hear faint muffled voices urgently calling upon us by name from the lavender-scented kitchen garden.

Sparrows chirped and rustled in the ivy without or sunned and preened on the lilac top, all unconscious of the small boy with the air gun not five feet away. Starlings, too, whistled from the roof ridge, their voices strangely muted by the window.

After a while, if one kept very still, minute rustlings began among the onion skins, the small scraps of bread glimmering under the rafters would be jerked and hidden, and straining eyes would see mysterious forms coming and going in the dark shadow of the sloping roof.

It was to this glory-hole we fled when the sound of carriage wheels crunched on the gravel drive and the front door bell pealed its mellow echoes through the old panelled house. Then followed the subdued scuffle as we fled down the back stairs and out through the kitchen and scullery.

Those sounds of a summer afternoon in the long ago come back so vividly as I write, the muffled sounds of voices and bird song return across the years and I am a little boy again, grubby of face and scarred of knee, crouching in my magic cell. But the laws of chance decreed that one day I should be found out. The key was then hidden in another place and the loft was barred to us for ever and we had to find other less romantic refuges from the Olympians.

Poor old Gunn of the white beard has long been gathered to his fathers, but I remember him with affection and gratitude. He once went away on a holiday and on his return he brought us boys a present each. I can hear now an unaccustomed heavy step ascending the two flights of stairs to the

schoolroom and see again Gunn appearing with two long packages in his arms.

They were pop guns, bright yellow varnished pop guns, banded with tin. We almost wept for joy.

June 6th Poplar Hawk Moth. The Pied Piper

TWO years ago I planted in my garden here four poplars, expressly for the purpose of attracting the Puss and Poplar Hawk moths. Tonight I had my reward for, on going up the garden, I saw what I took to be a large dead leaf caught on the stem of the privet hedge below one of the young trees.

On looking more closely I saw a superb specimen of a Poplar Hawk moth, newly hatched. The body, beautifully shaped, was of a soft smoke-grey colour, and the wings, like the body, were exquisitely formed, without tear or blenish, a rare blending of soft greys and rich browns. I left it on its stem and hope no bird spies it. All winter long it has lain within its black and hideous chrysalis under the cold earth, to emerge this soft June evening, whilst the swifts scream overhead and sweet new smells of plants and leaves perfume the garden.

Perhaps when the privet hedge grows higher I shall one day find a Privet Hawk, though this species is rare in the Midlands.

The planning and planting of a garden to attract natural things is great fun, and I like to think my wiles are proving successful. One day bullfinches may breed in the yews, I have already seen a pair about the garden.

After dinner I took the dogs for a stroll down the little lane at the back of the village. The delicate white flowers of the hemlock are coming into full bloom. With the wet spring the hedges are luxuriant and thick.

I met a man yesterday who told me a curious thing. He disliked this wonderful richness of Nature, the countless leaves and grass blades, the almost tropical prodigality of nature. Incidentally, he dislikes the writing of Richard Jefferies, who, like myself, could never have enough leaves and grass.

Coming back by the old toll gate I met the Piper. I call him this because he reminds me of a picture of the Pied Piper of Hamelin in a book I had as a child. He has the same long face and invariably wears a curious conical hat like a chimney, which accentuates his thin pointed visage. His tapered fingers should be playing over the holes of a bell-mouthed pipe. He is not a true countryman. When he makes his daily journey into the village for his supplies of grocery and such like things, which he fetches in a brown carrier bag, he is looked upon with unveiled curiosity, mingled with suspicion. Whence came this strange bird of passage? for he is a bird of passage. What is his story?

He is one those fugitives from London who appear in the midst of our

countryside like some foreign plant springing up among familiar meadow flowers.

By trade he was a watchmaker in Cheapside and in the first bad blitz he had his house demolished. He fled away like a startled animal, anywhere, and came at last to this little house by the old Toll gate which for years has been tenanted only by owls and rats. When he first arrived it was in the bitter winter weather, snow was on the ground. The Toll House had few whole windows, for passing tramps had broken most to make an entrance and village boys had stoned the crazy wooden shutters.

But the Piper soon put all in order. The windows were repaired, clean muslin curtains were affixed, the split wooden shutters mended. The bats, rats, and owls were given notice to quit, and as the year became more kind, and the snow at last melted on the weedy cabbage patch behind the house, the Piper perked up like a bird which has got over its moult.

When he first came he had a hunted look, his face was peaked and white and he wore shabby rent clothes. Now he has taken root and flourished, there is a new zest for living in his eye, he has smartened himself up.

Every evening I see him digging in his little plot under the damson tree, or standing, smoking his pipe, looking at his newly springing vegetables just showing through the dark soil. He reminds me of Mr. Polly at the Portwell Inn. No bombs can reach him here, the cuckoo and the song thrush wake him, the moths click in the hedge at the bottom of his garden, happy greenfinches sing in his damson trees.

The Piper's step is springy now, the once wan face is red and beaming, he has found peace and happiness in the quiet heart of the English countryside!

June 8th. Hawk Moths. The pattern of June. Smells and their Associations.

THE poplar hawk moth remained in exactly the same position all through the night of the sixth and all day yesterday.

This afternoon, weather close and hazy, I went to see whether it was still on its spray and found it had moved to the privet close by and was in coition with a mate, the extremities of their bodies joined together, each moth facing in the opposite direction.

Now, where did the second moth appear from? Were they both from the same poplar, had they hibernated in chrysalis form all winter under the same tree, or was this other moth from outside the garden?

It appears to me that the first moth was aware that a mate was in the vicinity and was radiating those mysterious wireless rays or 'waves' which, so some naturalists believe, attract the opposite sex, and this accounts for the moth remaining in the same position for so long. Now the female should lay her eggs on the nearby poplar and later, if I keep a look out, I may see the caterpillars.

It is wonderful the way these moths are camouflaged. As they sit end to end among the privet leaves they are indistinguishable from their surroundings. When the insect is at rest both fore wings are drooped backwards so that the tip of each under wing (or hind wing) projects beyond the fore wing. I was puzzled why this should be but soon saw the reason. On each lower wing is a large reddish splash or mark. If the moth did not fold its top wings backwards in the way just described this marking would be very distinctive and visible and might catch the eye of a passing bird. Why then should some British moths be so distinctively and brightly coloured?

Moths such as the Tigers and Magpies are very easily seen from some distance. But I have noticed birds do not attempt to touch these gaudy moths, they are perhaps shy of brightly coloured insects, which no doubt have a bitter taste.

As a general rule the moths do not interest me as much as the butterflies. The latter love the sunlight and summer airs, seeming to lead an almost bird-like existence, whilst the moths remind one more of bats, emerging for the most part in the late evening and darkness.

Most entomologists prefer the moth family because it is so large with so many different varieties, even of the same species, but this interest is akin to that of the stamp collector.

We are rapidly approaching the 'peak' period, when the summer is at its loveliest. I suppose it is not possible to fix on any one week when this tide reaches its limit, the process is so gradual and with so many different kinds of plants and trees 'overlapping', as it were, in their freshness. The ashes are not yet in full leaf and the hawthorn is not out, though most of the hedges show white clusters of buds.

Tonight I took the dogs down Sperrywell Lane. This is one of my favourite walks, an undulating road flanked on the north side by a steep line of thickly wooded hills, and on the south by wide rolling country.

Walking along the lush turf margin close to the trees and undergrowth I noticed that glorious scent of new foliage and plants; many different perfumes blended together; of ferns and grass, half-opened hawthorn, sycamore flowers, bluebells, young nettles, and many other plants. The combination of all these is a single definite perfume which is not unlike cowslips.

To me it is the loveliest perfume in nature, more rare and fragrant than any single plant or flower. At no other time of the year may you catch this fragrance, this *personal* smell of the English countryside in June.

It is a joy, too, when the eye examines the hedges, with their sturdy wealth of intricate detail, to see the infinite variety of leaf and grass, each so symmetrical and perfect. The hedges are now at their best, in a week or two they will have lost their fresh green.

The grass bordering the road is just as intricate, one wonders so many different kinds of plants can grow together; buttercup, dandelion, celandine, ragged robin, trefoil, clover, bird's foot trefoil, plantain, silver weed (a great lover of roadsides), hemlock and nettle, and hundreds of other plants, all woven in and out in an intricate pattern or uniform carpet, each with a different hue of green. Some have seed heads nearly ripe, others are ripe; like the trees they have their own fruiting and flowering. The grasses alone are a lifetime's study.

Sometimes I have wondered which is the loveliest month of the year. Surely it is June? There is nothing so exquisite as an English June. Now we may see the mighty power of Nature and life in its prime, every plant and bush perfect and fresh at the same time.

A young rabbit sat up on the margin of the narrow road. He allowed me to come within thirty yards before diving into the nettles in the ditch. Like a fresh open bud he seemed, perfect in every detail, his eye round and full, urgent with alarm and suspicion, his little coat glistening with health.

A chestnut tree overhung the ditch, pink candles on every sweeping bough, the palmated leaves full of quiet green lights and deeper shades, 'rich with June'.

Soon a branch shook and three young carrions bustled out, clumsily, on new-found wings; one remained looking down at me with side-cocked head, clasping the bough with unsteady grip of black-scaled feet. In a month or two that black rascal will not allow a man within a hundred yards of him, he has not yet learnt to associate the two legged animal with death, he has no other fear but that which has been transmitted to him by generations of persecution.

Golden tails hung from a nearby sycamore, they were sweetly fragrant and humming with bees. Now and again the cuckoo's voice came from the distant wooded slope, so far away that I only heard the second, deeper, note; it came faintly like a bell 'Cu . . . Cu . . . Cu'. Imagination had to supply the first. But to me there was more summer in the whitethroat's bubbling song in the ditch beside me. The stems of the nettles quivered as he sidled up for a moment, like a diver emerging from a green sea. His crest was raised and he looked at me out of a brilliant eye. The raised crest gave him a friendly aspect and I noticed his ashy grey cheeks were the same tint as my poplar hawk moth's wings at home. It occurs to me, in relation to what I have just said about the perfumes of leaves and grass, that few people realize how bound up are scents and smells with our emotional reactions and recollections.

It may be that I am different from other people in this matter, but to me a smell or perfume is as significant as sight and sound. It is not that my sense of smell is anything out of the ordinary.

Every house has its own smell which reflects, as much as the furniture and decoration in it, the personalities of its tenants.

Women, at least the kind of women who know how to attract men, realize the importance of rare perfumes and they choose them with great care, always using the same scent. The average male is tremendously influenced by his nose as well as his eyes, and it is strange how some women overlook this fact. It is the faint hint of costly perfume which is most alluring. In our primeval state these things were probably far more important than they are now.

And I will add one more note on this subject, which seems to be overlooked by some. All the really charming people I have met seem to live in houses which have a 'nice' smell about them!

In the same way, each country has its own smell; the downs and mountain country, the rivers and forests, desert and fens. Natural smells, like tunes, send the mind searching back to incidents, pleasures, and sorrows, long past and half forgotten.

To give an instance of this. Some years ago I stayed at a friend's house not very distant from Bristol. It was a charming old house with a pleasant walled garden. Close to the house grew a scented willow and at the time of my visit it had just opened its sticky leaves, emitting that strong scent, some people would call it a smell, which can travel an immense distance on the wind.

But my hostess disliked this scent intensely, so much so that she wanted her husband to cut the tree down. And after a while I found the reason. It seemed that whilst she was in India (her husband was an army officer) a tree with a very similar smell grew close to their bungalow, and whilst she was expecting her first baby the tree was coming into flower, emitting a perfume very similar to that of the Scented Willow. And years afterwards this same smell brought back to her mind those distant hours.

The Scented, or Sweet Willow, is fairly common in English gardens. We had one at my old home. It is a rapid grower and when the leaves are half opened they are extremely sticky to the touch and much sought after by bees and other insects.

This sticky varnish is the origin of the smell. The tree is easily grown from cuttings; I have one now in my own garden which came from the tree at my old home. I simply cut off a branch close to the main trunk, peeled it of bark for about six inches above the break, and stuck it firmly in the ground. Like all the poplar and willow family it soon rooted and is now of considerable size.

Not long ago it was suggested that the Talkies might be improved by introducing appropriate smells at the right moment. For instance, the hero meets the heroine in a field of new-mown hay, then the scent of hay would be wafted to the audience, and so forth.

Smells of our childhood never wholly depart from memory, they remain, as it were, in the subconscious mind, as much as sound or mental pictures.

Weather too affects us more than we think, all of us feel more buoyant and happy when the sun shines.

June 9th. Poplar Hawk moths

THE Hawk moths have departed and I only hope the female laid her eggs before she went. The weather continues overcast and there has been heavy rain. We are nearly at midsummer and have had no sun to speak of since late March.

June 12th. The old farm

THE old farmhouse, many gabled, with its attendant outbuildings, lies in a hollow of the fields, protected on the north side by a sloping meadow, the surface of which is moulded and trenched, full of queer depressions and hollows. Long ago there was an abbey on that spot. Where lately the lambs frisked and played on the April grass the monks used to sit all a-row catching their Friday's dinner; the site of the fish pond is still visible, a large square place, bounded on all sides by a high green bank. An opening has been cut at the eastern end to allow the water to drain away and now only very little moisture remains. In the middle of the flat expanse is a small island or mound, where the lambs love to play at King of the Castle. Probably in old times this island was planted with trees and served as a mooring point for some rotund abbot seated in the abbey punt.

But Time, the leveller, has swept the great abbey away, and where once the water gleamed and swallow dipped, golden kingcups flourish in their season.

The shaven heads and mumbling prayers are forgotten, but the swallows remain unchanged, and if there was water in the pond now they would still sweep above it, dipping into the surface as they flew, just as they did in the old monks' time.

The grass on the abbey foundations is now clipped short by rabbits and sheep. A winding track leads to the farm from the nearby road. Turf grows in the centre in an unbroken band, the road itself is visible as three parallel strips of white, on which hard surface the sheep, once a mountain animal, love to lie in the evening sun. Centuries of meadow existence have not altered their nature, they like to feel the hard unyielding surface under them and it is warmer and drier than the turf.

The farmhouse is not visible from the high road, even its clustered chimneys are hidden, though on any still evening the blue smoke may be seen spiralling from them.

At the west end of the house is the apple orchard, the old trees lean all ways like tipsy men. In spring their lichened twigs are smothered in blossom and in autumn are weighted down with fruit, rosy-cheeked delicious apples. How the goldfinchs love the orchard! Even in winter they sometimes come to the apple trees, leaving for a space the thistly wild places on the uplands to visit their birth place. Then their gold wings bring unaccustomed colour to the naked grey old branches.

The grass in the orchard seems finer and richer than elsewhere, moles love it. Their brown or deep chocolate-coloured earthworks are all over the place. The white umbells of the hedge parsley grow well up the leaning trunks, the bases of the trees are hidden in a sea of deep lush green.

A thick thorn hedge, well clipped, encloses the orchard from the open field behind. In the nettles close to the house is a long stone object like a trough, stained with lichen and green with moss, a lidless coffin, which somehow has survived the waves of time, waves which have beaten down and hidden from sight the once majestic pile close by. At one time it contained the remains of a monk or abbot from the abbey. Now purified by sun and wind it lies, outlasting life, defying decay. The whitethroat bubbles its song over it, sometimes a shower of rain collects within, but the moisture drains away through a small hole which was originally made for a much more grisly purpose.

Sometimes in the hot suns of August spiders explore its rough-hewn sides, or the grasshoppers spring on to the edge and sit awhile shrilling their heat song. In the hairy nettles which grow on either hand I have found the silken tents of the tortoiseshell caterpillars.

Ivy clothes the western end of the gable, 'bushing in' the windows, which peep out, white painted and cosy-curtained, like so many wren's nests. They look on to the orchard. Wagtails build in the ivy and of course the ubiquitous house sparrows. They love the farms better than cottages. But of the sparrows, more anon.

The north side of the house is protected, as though the hill was not enough, by a high stone wall, on which aubretia and valerian flower in season, and in this wall is an ancient moulded doorway, without doubt originally from the abbey.

The west side of the house looks out across a marshy meadow to the infant Avon. One would never guess this little ditch was so soon to become one of our most famous rivers, yet every little running ditch is destined to reach the big rivers and ultimately the sea. It is dramatic to think, when looking upon some spring (not a 'winter spring', or 'winter bourne') that it will finally reach the sea; what a long, long way, and with how many windings? how many pollarded willows will it pass? The water I hold in the palm of my hand will take many weeks to meet the sea!

Beyond the stream are other earth-works, of whose origin little is known, a long steep bank of red sand honeycombed along all its length with rabbit burrows.

This bank is also the home of badgers. Their ancient setts are deep, far beyond the reach of terrier or spade, for the old ash trees growing in the bank bar the way to all save these strange, wild, bearlike creatures.

There is an oak or two at the northern end of the bank and here, in the golden autumn weather, the burnished pheasants come for acorns, as do the grey wood pigeons.

The south side of the farm is hidden by the farm buildings, cart sheds, some full of old farm lumber; wooden pig troughs, timber, and faggots, under which the rabbits love to lie, to say nothing of rats.

Nothing but a ferret can stir them, for no dog can squeeze its way in, though a ferret could do so. No matter how long the spaniel or terrier scratches or scrabbles at the unyielding logs the rabbit will not stir. They are quite safe behind their wooden barricades which would be a day's work to remove. On this side, too, is the farm midden and cow sheds. The foot squelches deep in the yard and there is the full ripe smell of manure and pigs, mingled with straw.

The old tiled roofs, both of farm and buildings, are stained ochre gold with lichen, and in places there are pads of green moss, though these moss patches are burnt brown in the summer heats.

The one constant sound about the farm, winter or summer, is the monotonous chirp of sparrows. They are everywhere; in the ivy on the house, along the roof ridges, in the barns and straw yard, in the farmhouse garden.

In this ancient place one senses the farming year. Spring and lambing time, then hay and harvest. The creaking waggons, whose wheel hubs are like small barrels dripping black grease, come jerkily through the gate, their huge iron-tyred rims bumping over the grey caked earth which has been dried by the late summer sun, that same sun which has ripened the harvest borne aloft. The long waggons, with their faded blue paint and red wheels, now bleached to an anaemic orange, come slowly down the winding track past the old earthworks and wisps of golden straw drop behind them on the white dusty road.

The sleepy days of summer are called to mind, when the swallows are for ever sweeping to and fro about the gables, stooping in one blue swift curve up into the shadow of the barn, where they have built their nests, those cunningly puddled nests, which reflect the glare of the sunshiny trodden earth without.

Not thirty yards away is the circular pond where the swallows gather their plaster and cattle come to drink, and the great lumbering farm 'hairies' dribble and ruminate, sucking at the khaki water through pendu-

lous velvet lips. Not a tree shades the pond, it might almost be a dew pond.

But here is the plaster factory for the swallows' nests, the blue-black birds gather the mud pellets all through the summer mornings, the white-rumped house martins with them. Three pairs of swifts nest under the tiles of the farmhouse itself, though of course they do not build their nests of mud. A few dirty cobwebs, some grimy straw perhaps, and an odd feather or two (the latter picked up on the wing), is all the material they require. They make their homes with the bats and spiders and are in consequence very verminous. These reptilian birds, with their flat heads and long dusky bodies (as grimy as the crevices in which they make their nests), are lords of the air, no other British bird can teach them anything about aeronautics.

They feed, mate, and are even supposed to sleep, on the wing, and in consequence their feet are wee things hardly worthy of the name.

The summer sounds about the farm then are the chirp of sparrows, twitter of swallows, scream of swifts, and all the usual domestic sounds of ducks, cows, sheep, and pigs. The latter lie among the malodorous straw, where the sun shines with full force, their faces set in luxurious smiles, their long ears flapping at the flies. The sty reeks, but it is not an unpleasant smell. Laughable creatures always, as humorous as the button-eyed ducks which troop gravely about the midden. Both ducks and pigs appear to smile, as though they are well aware that they are Nature's jokes.

But the farmer has no time to sit back and enjoy all these pleasant things, or listen to the summer sounds about his farm. Work, work, work, from dawn to dark, the sweat rolls from him, his hardened muscles ache, yet there is no 'letting up'. There is always a job to be done somewhere, even in the slack season, beasts must be fed, ditches dug, the plough must cut into the earth, again and yet again. Weary work at most times, such as rolling or sowing. Some people make a fuss about mowing a lawn, but what of the farmer, ceaselessly plodding to and fro upon the wide plain of plough! the hedges never seem to get any nearer.

It is quicker work with a tractor, but some of the old fashioned men prefer horses, especially for rolling. You cannot roll with tractors like you can with the slow plodding horses.

I will not write of the men who have lived and toiled for generations in this old house. I am more interested in the farmstead, and its fields, and the slow sweet passage of the years about it. On a farm is hidden the very essence of the English countryside, though only an idler like myself can find it, and like a sparrow I sit on the old wall among the stonecrop, listening to the hundred, hundred, sounds which go to make up its life. How the goldfinches are singing in the apple trees!

I look down and see the coffin among the nettles. A little brown wren

arrives from nowhere and perches for a moment on the stone side, merrily unconscious of what he sits upon, his cheeky little stub tail erect over his back, bobbing like a miniature dipper. He sees me watching him and whirrs away.

I see the red cattle grouped about the pond, some standing knee deep in the muddy water. They have quenched their thirsts and are now ruminating with half-closed eyes, drunk with summer. Little bubbles rise out in the middle of the pond, are they from fish? They may be carp, many of these old horse ponds hold carp, one of the least edible of fish. It does not interest me much that there was once an abbey here, I have not the antiquarian's love of old stones and mouldering bones, I am concerned more with this summer evening about the old farm, I am content to sit and idle, to sit here on this mellow wall and stare, an idle countryman.

The cowman yonder, now guiding an unsteady-legged calf and its mooing anxious mother into the farmyard, must think me a useless sort of fellow. I suppose I am. My arms are not furnished with hardened muscles, or my neck burnt a deep tan by the sun.

I am thinking of the passing seasons, each summer lapping like a warm tide about the stained walls and lichened tiles. I like to think of the families of men who have lived and died under that roof. The starlings whistle right merrily about those gables in springtime but now they are away, all hatched and flown. They are enjoying themselves in the deep meadows, down among the buttercups. As you walk through the golden sea they rise suddenly a few feet from you, drab in their immature plumage. Not until later will they win the gloss and stars of the adult.

There is more bird song about the farm in winter than now.

Only the white lime-splashes below the nesting holes tell of those recently departed families, every ventilation slit in the wall has held a nest, though some are tenanted by sparrows. Chirp, chirp, chirp! Those sparrows! sleepy soundy things! A swallow's wing flickers over the roofs and I hear Mac, the cowman, bang the gate behind the lowing cow and unsteady doddling calf. Only a few hours ago it arrived, I saw it just after it was born, its coat still damp, mother and calf too weak to stand. What a sudden amazing world to be born into! this world of warm sun and golden buttercups, how different from that other blind existence of an hour or two ago (that step but one from Death), the oldest and most amazing miracle in the world!

And amazement is writ large on its damp little face as its mother turns to nuzzle it, uttering that quick low 'moo', short and passionate.



CHAPTER III

Summer

June 13th. Things that go bump in the night

In the middle of the night, my wife and I awoke out of a deep sleep. It was as though some heavy object had blundered against our bedroom door. I knew what it was, a distant senseless bomb. A minute or two after, I heard the throb of a German plane pass over the house and going to the window I looked out on the mysterious dusky garden.

It was a fine June night, though overcast. No stars were visible, yet the sky was full of vague luminosity. The garden appeared solitary, thick with leaf and shadow. I could see the sturdy knobby rods of the lupins in the herbaceous border and the feathery gloom of the macrocarpi bushes along the garden fence. Out in the meadow, sheep were lying down, pale blobs against the grey-green grass. The 'only signs of life (or death), were the firefly flickers of 'ack ack' fire to the west.

Again the door rattled. It is badly hung, any distant bomb will shake it. What sudden Hell had come to somebody over there? It was 2.35 a.m. Soon the first birds will be singing. Tomorrow the sun is going to shine again over the green river valleys and the ivory may trees. Across the meadow I could see the waxy candles of the horse chestnut tree. Tomorrow night William Webber will come across the footpath for his nightly pint and, a little afterwards, I shall see Mr and Mrs Gubbins, the Colonel's gardener and his wife; all these simple souls are bound for the Drovers' Arms.

It is the same each evening. They smarten themselves up, put off their workaday clothes, and don their Sabbath blacks, Gubbins crowned by that

rustic insignia of respectability, the bowler hat, Mrs G. in a straw with a white ribbon, and buttoned boots.

'Good evening Sir' they say politely as they pass through the swing gate. At 10.15 they go back across the meadow, swaying, bumping into each other, radiating cheerfulness. Topsy? Oh dear no! Just happy and contented and a little 'muzzed up'. The Drovers' Arms is their Club, one of their very few pleasures. But I laugh to see them go, sometimes accompanied by their black and white cat which trots behind with erect tail. Now and again, in the way cats have, it stops and is coaxed onwards by chirrups and thick endearing words from Mrs Gubbins.

The three disappear round the white hawthorn, Mr Gubbins knocking into Mrs Gubbins, the cat scuttling fore and aft. They laugh together, man and wife, a little too easily perhaps, laughter with a 'liquid' ring to it.

'Things that go bump in the night' are 'them Garmans again'. But I somehow think that come what may, Mr and Mrs Gubbins (and the cat) will still go back across the meadow path flanked by the golden buttercups. Strangely garbed men, as fantastic as the mouthing gargoyles on the old church tower, foreign of speech and cropped of poll, may fly high overhead like foul birds or stinging insects. But Mr and Mrs Gubbins (and the cat) will sleep soundly, together with the white-rumped martins who nest under the eaves of their thatch.

Dingle Cottage, where they live, is at the bottom of an old sand pit surrounded by trees. Gubbins being a gardener has bright flowers always blooming in summer; huge sunflowers with heads as big as dinner plates almost tip the thatch; snapdragons, the old fashioned sort, line the path to their front door. The once barren sand pit blossoms. Under the apple trees behind the house Gubbins keeps his bees, three hives of them, little white houses set all arow among the meadow sweet. Mrs Gubbins was once a cook, even in war time Gubbins comes home to find appetising dishes set before him. I often wonder why there are any old maids among cooks. In the really hot weather Dingle Cottage must be a 'proper warm place', set down there with all those trees around it, and the hot cliffs of sand on three sides.

No breeze can reach the cottage; even on a windy day the smoke from its single chimney rises straight up. You would have thought the house might be damp, but no! it is the driest house in the parish, so 'they' say. Sand, you see, not clay subsoil. There is a well of good spring water within twenty yards of their back door, one of the old-fashioned wells, with a little wooden roof over it and a bucket and chain.

What matter if horned devils fly overhead among the remote stars? Dingle Cottage will outlive a score of wars. It is as snug and trim as a chaffinch's nest or a goldfinch's (both species build in the apple tree close

by, and the latter are fond of the sunflower seeds). Rooks build in the trees about, as thick as thieves. Their white droppings splash the thatch, the black rascals! Yet it is the only rookery we have in the village.

June 14th. Tree Pipits, Redstarts and Nightingales

GREY weather continues, though it is now the cream of the year. All the hawthorn is in bloom, but it has been a poor season for blossom, the late frosts cut the apple and plum 'something terrible'. But the fields are now at their best, for the buttercups are out and the ashes in full leaf. When the bloom goes off the hawthorn the hedges will lose their fresh green and the newly formed berries will give the hedgerows a rusty, tired appearance.

Down Hemploe lane I heard the tree pipits singing in the grey wind, somewhere up among the beeches. I could not see them, only the numerous leaves turned their pale bellies to the passing gusts.

This bird is common in the midlands. They are peculiar little people, solitary and shy, avoiding human company and dwellings. But their song is sweet and summerlike and as far-reaching as that of the lark. They love those quiet meadows away from roads where old oaks and ashes grow, ivy decked, and with numerous crannies and cracks, wherein the redstarts build. Both birds frequent the same kind of country, though of course the tree pipit builds in the long grass.

The 'singing tree' of the cock tree pipit is never far from the nest, though the latter is very hard to find. You may disturb the close-sitting hen but otherwise you may search in vain. Like the tree pipit, the cock redstart has his singing tree, and a fine wild little song he has, very musical and robin-like. All summer through the tree pipit sings from his hedgerow oak, or rather he returns to this tree when his song is finished, for he soars up a little way like a lark and parachutes downwards, singing all the time. The redstart sings from his perch.

The latter half of the tree pipits song is long drawn out—'Chip-er chip-er chip-er'. When the intruder ventures near the nest, especially when the young are hatched, the parents get very fussed, uttering a sort of sibilant squeak 'tseet! tseet!'

Redstarts are not so common in Warwickshire as they are in the adjoining county of Northamptonshire. I used to find their nests in the stone walls and ancient oaks of the park at home. Like the nest of the tree pipit it was difficult to find, and when found, hard to reach the eggs, which are like those of the hedgesparrow, but of a lighter blue.

The ever trembling rusty tail is shaken from side to side, as a dog wags its stump, and if you are near the nest both parents become frantic, scolding and over-anxious, 'uec-TIC uec-TIC TIC!' the tail is shaken on the 'tic'.

The nightingales have much the same note, but in their case it is a much lower pitch, 'uee PURRR, uee PURRR'. The purring note is very low and guttural, it is amazing that so small a bird can utter it, and the bird itself remains invisible

June 15th. The Mill

AH! this is better, a wide arch of blue sky, deepest directly overhead, palest Prussian blue on the horizon, and here and there, sailing gently over in haphazard convoy, little puffs of white cloud. You can see these clouds dissolve as they pass over, like some white substance dissolving in blue water.

This is the day to visit the mill on the old millstream, the hot sun conjures up visions of dragonflies and shadow-patterned water, cool sedge forests and the smell of fish. Buttercups are a golden blaze in every meadow, the course of the brook can be traced by the widening double row of alders and hazel, with some white-blossomed hawthorn among them. You can see the mill from the road, across a cloth of buttercup gold. The sleepy-eyed cows, satiny of coat, stand knee-deep in the lush June meadows; and heavy udders brush the yellow varnished buttercups. Their rough tongues avoid these flowers however, even though you may fancy you see the golden fire of the petals in the butter fresh from the dairy churn.

As the brook winds across the fields the band of yellow widens and narrows, following the course of the stream, though the road on which I walk is straight. Then, in another yard or two, I come to the old gate with the initials J.M.H. roughly carved on the top strake. Who 'J.M.H.' was (or is) I do not know; some rustic, an idler like myself, perhaps, who had nothing better to do than carve his name to pass away the time. The latch is awry and the gate fastened to the post by a rusty chain, kept in place by two big-headed nails.

Looking over the top bar I see the rough flinty track curving gracefully in an S to the wooden footbridge, where the Blythe crinkles and sparkles over very dark and mossy pebbles. Two tall ashes grow on either side of the bridge so that there is always shade at that place in summer time. And in that cool spot the mayflies dance away their brief life.

The chain is lifted and replaced and I am soon on the footbridge and out of the shade, though I pause for a moment to watch the water sliding with polished breast beneath, with perhaps a black-backed trout lying with nose upstream, pivoted as it were by his head whilst his tail sways. From the winding track the heat is reflected; on either hand, light and colour blaze everywhere. Instinctively the eyes screw themselves up against it; so much brightness is overwhelming for the wide open gaze.

The mill roof is now visible over the top of a small knoll (this knoll is smothered with white daisies but no buttercups), the thick hawthorns partly screen it. One can smell their 'cocoanutty' scent even from this distance. Beyond the mill again is the ruined windmill. It is unusual to find two kinds of mills at the same spot; water and wind are here harnessed to do man's work for him, or rather they did so in the past, for both mills are now decaying. The ponderous water wheel has not turned for many a year and the Death Watch beetle has eaten into the timbers of the windmill. Quite a lusty ash tree is sprouting from the roof of the latter. How it finds sustenance is quite surprising, but there it is, quite four feet high.

But the dominating feature of the scene is not the gold lichened mill roof, or the pointed wooden mill top, but the huge black poplar which grows at the end of the mill pool. It is a magnificent specimen, which seems to smell of water and trouty matters. Its very leaves have caught the whisper of the sparkling stream, they rustle so gently together in the lightest summer breeze. As I approach up the dusty track all manner of sounds and smells crowd about me, filling the senses with unimagined delight. There is a steady rushing to the left, behind a big, round, hawthorn bush. It is the water pouring over the sill of the old weir and I turn aside, drawn by this cool sound.

A bruised grass track leads through the thick nettles close to the hawthorn bush. I pass the richly clustered 'May' flowers (at close quarters the scent is almost overpowering) and note the speckled centres to each bloom, a mountain of sunlit flowerets, dazzling in the clean light, blue grey in the shadow. In a moment I am standing in the cool shade of a leafy bower. The rays of the sun can scarcely pierce it, they show as round spots, like golden-green coins, among the deeper green shade. All about is a lovely jungle of meadow sweet (Queen of the Meadows), water dock, fools' parsley, and nettles.

Just below is the water. It pours ceaselessly in a thick amber sheet over the broken stone sill. Green moss grows on the stones, ferns of many kinds fill every cranny. The actual lip of the fall is smooth and polished, where the curved shoulder catches the light. Then, as it strikes the mossy face of the stone slabs, it falls in a silvery whisper, spread out in a thin veil, each moss particle breaking the flow in lines of glittering bubbles. Below is the circular pool, bored out by many years of winter floods. It seems terrifyingly deep, full of hidden brown and amber lights where a sun shaft catches it, and on looking closely, dim blocks of crumbled masonry are seen at the bottom of the pool, some eight feet down. In the broken water directly under the hatch no fish can be seen, save perhaps a sideways flicker of a dark form. But it is there I have poached many a spotted beauty (with red brandlings) and I have the recollection of one monster which lay beaten

and nearly drowned within reach of my net and of the parting of the gut, just as I was about to slide the long spotted form over the ring. I frequented the dam for days after but never hooked that particular trout again.

In this green cell, where the only sound is the persistent hiss of the silver water-veil, one can imagine many things; strange wild fairy music, voices calling, water sprites and naiads. Though the afternoon is hot and the cattle have taken to the willow shade to escape the gads, it is as cool as a cellar here, indeed it is almost chilly. Only a few paces distant is that golden world of heat and shimmer; why, even the tiles on the mill roof would be too hot to touch!

And so I go back into that glare and heat, back past the glorious hawthorn mound, the whisper of the fall sinks wistfully away.

Now comes the mill pond into view, a big pool, square and green as a billiard table. A waterhen jerks under the willow and her sooty infants struggle after, wheezing pitifully. They leave an inky wake behind. The American duck weed soon comes together again.

On the sunken willow branch one can see the nest where they were hatched. Bright green grass grows inside it now, but it serves as a resting raft for tired moorhen babies.

At the head of the pool towers the mighty poplar, a mountain of a tree, with branches boldly swept and gracefully curved, not unlike a half expanded fan. There it is, against the blue drop-curtain of the sky, each leaf a-whisper and a-glitter. Did you ever see a nobler tree?

The plants for miles around crowd to Pedder's Mill, it is an oasis in a desert of heat. Lady's smocks, Meadow sweet, Globe flowers, Marsh marigold, Jack-by-the-hedge, Campions (red and white), Enchanter's nightshade, Loosestrife, Rose bay and Cow parsnip, Water dropwort, Angelica, Mugwort, and Tanzy—these are only a few, lists are wearisome. Each has its own smell, all are mingled in one delicious bouquet.

I will have them all, will smell and handle them, I will note their strong juicy stalks, revel in their abounding health, revel luxuriantly in summer's bounty. Never enough!

On the mill roof sit the white fantails asleep in the sun. How can their coral feet endure those heated tiles among the stone crop? Dazzlingly white pigeons, boldly outlined against the summer sky. The heavy iron-shod wheel is sullen and still, each bolted rod rusty brown, draped in moss. From below comes merry water-talk and something is seen pushing up the shallows beyond. A water rat? No, it is too large. Yes . . . yes it is! an enormous trout quite three pounds in weight! With a fillip and splashing it comes broad back out of water, and gains the deeps under the wheel, for what purpose I know not, unless it be to spawn.

peasant bird of the earth and the down country. He has a vantage point exactly half way along the hedgerow, a spray of hawthorn which, for some obscure reason, was spared by the hedger. Here he sits among the red tipped hawthorn leaves, jingling his song, which breathes the spirit of the corn. Sometimes he flits to another bush, an elder, a few yards distant, but the hawthorn shoot is his favourite perching place. Hour by hour he sits in the burning sun, occasionally flying across the waving sea of corn to the distant telegraph wire which runs along the lane. Somewhere out in the green crop his drab wife sits upon her eggs. The nest is cunningly hidden, deep among the clover and the corn rods.

'Chip, chip, chip, titcetitzeeo! Chip, chip, chip, titcetitzeeo!' is the burden of his song, a weighty sleepy burden it is, seemingly, a song of the maturing summer and the rich harvest fields.

The sun's rays beat down unshaded on the dusty hawthorn leaves, even the hairy nettles droop in the hedge bottom, a bee swings out over the rippling corn. But still he sings, this stout peasant bunting, sings a song as maddening as that of the Indian Coppersmith bird. Yet I like that song. You can hear it for many a mile all over the downland country, the dusty sweating soldiers hear it as they march and counter march upon Salisbury plain, just as they hear the larks forever singing. There is something too of the breezy uplands about its jingle and perhaps just a hint of the sea.

Though now the corn is barely two feet high there will be poppies later, close to the hedge, the most vivid wild flower we have. How charming are the half-split hairy pods of the poppy, the shape of beech nut husks; when partly open they show a scarlet line. I used to break open those slightly hairy, green, prisons to peep at the damp and crumpled skirts within; the smell too was odd and soporific.

Though the hedge is devoid of trees there are several fine ashes beside the brick barn. There is nothing picturesque at first glance in this red square building with its slate roof. It has nothing of the character of the Cotswold or Essex barn, it is not thatched with straw or tiled with lichened slabs. Yet for all that it is romantic, at least to my eye, standing alone in the eye of the sun amidst the ripening corn. It reflects the Midland character of this country, plain, straightforward, self-important.

It does not pretend to be anything but 'a barn'.

Three curious oval windows pierce the western wall. It is open beneath for carts or cattle, the floor is soft with straw and old manure, where beetles skip and flies buzz.

The pillars supporting the front of the roof are like the walls, of red brick. But that fiery red of the baked brick has weathered to a warm pink, the tint of a bullfinch's breast, and not all have the same tint.

In the top of one of the pillars there is a brick missing and here a swallow

has built its mud nest, the white feathers show over the knobby mud rim.

Inside the barn is a ladder which gives access to the loft above, which is lighted by the three oval windows. Yes, there is something very plain about this barn, it is as uncompromising as a chapel.

Swallows build in the loft, as well as along the rafters under it; they go in and out through the oval windows, for there is a big colony, a regular 'swallowry', above.

In each gable end is a narrow slit for ventilation, but generations of sparrows and starlings have stuffed it full of straw and nobody has taken the trouble to pull the rubbish out. Starling droppings stain the rose-red bricks and below each slit in a long-drawn line of white.

Just now one can hear a brood of young starlings up in the 'arrow slit', 'querrr querrr querrr', a rather sleepy full-fed sound which will become more vociferous when the parents arrive with food.

The latter will never fly direct to the nest, they perch first on the gable top, their bills crammed with juicy black flies and creamy grubs, uttering, despite their full beaks, a warning, jarring note.

The house sparrows, which, of course, live in and around the barn, must lead a lonely sort of life. Yet they seem contented enough and are shyer of man than their village and town cousins.

Inside the barn a few wooden sheep-troughs are piled against the wall, crusted with earth and cow manure, and all along the end is a brick feeding manger, or cattle trough, from behind which one may occasionally surprise a rat as big as a rabbit. A brick has fallen from the manger and in the cavity I have frequently found roosting wrens and tits.

Once, when I was bending down and looking into the hole, a wren shot out and hit me full in the face. These little birds love to find some cosy hole such as this in which to sleep in winter.

When harvest time arrives and the adjoining fields are stooked up with regimented lines of corn sheaves, the wood pigeons flock to the ash trees close by. They sit awhile to scan the surrounding country before dropping down on the sheaves. I have shot many a grey robber from the cover of the 'chapel' barn.

Harvest time is the only period of the year when this building sees any sort of human bustle and work. The thirsty labourers repair to its shadows to drink their cold tea (ale is no longer carried to the harvest fields, at least in any quantity, as it was in Richard Jefferies' day).

Occasionally, when the adjoining fields are pasture instead of corn, the sheep are folded in the barn for lambing. When the harvest is cleared and the sparrows have gone to the stackyards, and the starlings only drop in once in a while to whistle a tune on a frosty morning, the barn is strangely

silent, It must have stories to tell, of weary tramps taking shelter from the storm or the oncoming of night, and it has at least one tragic story.

A single beam spans the interior and from this a man once hung himself. At least, that is the story in the village. And once or twice a hunted fox has come here for refuge and the rafters have rung with the baying of blood-lusting hounds and shouts of men.

One other bird frequents the 'chapel' barn, a white owl. He is by far its most important tenant and I had nearly forgotten him. He rears a family every year up in the loft. And in the tranquil twilights of summer I have often seen his episcopal form solemnly rigid on the gable top, and heard his melancholy hoot quivering from the darkling ash trees; a distinguished bird, who seems so vastly superior, both in form and plumage, to the other drab birdy people who haunt that lonely place.

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CHAPTER IV

Summer

June 19th. Romantic Catesby

This lovely weather holds, indeed, it becomes hotter every day. There is no doubt about it, this week sees the peak of the year, everything is at its best, in full leaf and flower.

The hen blackbird is building another nest, for the third time this season. Her second attempt was not fruitful. She built the nest whilst her mate was caring for the youngsters of her first brood and she never laid in it. Now she has completed this third nest in an ivy stump across the meadow. For plaster she comes to my rockery pool. Blackbirds, like thrushes, line their nests with mud, but unlike the thrushes, they line the mud with hay and grass before laying.

I do not mind birds using my garden as a 'nest factory' if they build in the garden, but I think it is unfair to take advantage of me in this way when I shall not have the pleasure of seeing the nest built or the young reared!

The baby chaffinches in the nest below my dressing room window are ready to fly, the young greenfinches have already left their nest in the ivy stump and are playing about among the thick layers of the sycamore, keeping up a maddening 'chip-er, chip-er, chip-er' from dawn to dark, sticking to their parents like glue. Their breasts are striped like those of linnets. Green linnet is another name for the greenfinch. The cuckoos are still a public nuisance, keeping us awake last thing at night and waking us in the early mornings.

These days, when time and the world seem topsy-turvy, one goes to bed at say, eleven o'clock, which by the sun is only 9 p.m., it does seem stupid

to think of sleep while the sky is so light and one's childhood memories are recalled. It is horrid to be sent to bed when the birds are still singing and the world bright with sun.

We had an expedition to Catesby yesterday, and ate our lunch in a flowery meadow not far from the lovely old mansion. That part of Warwickshire is very remote and leafy, true Shakespeare country, with fine elms, shady narrow lanes, and small meadows ablaze with buttercups. The afternoon was excessively hot with a sort of thundery sticky heat.

I wandered off down a narrow gated lane and came to a square pond hedged round with aspens with another smaller sheet of water adjacent. No doubt these were originally fish ponds of the big house. Here was summer peace for you, war seemed far away in this secret green place. Under overhanging aspen leaves, which almost dipped into the water, shoals of fish swam to and fro just under the surface, picking up insects which fell from the leaves. In the green-shadowed water I could see shoal after shoal streaming past, some nosing the surface after insects. White bedstraw grew high round the pond, bees hummed and flies danced. Soon three youths arrived, one wearing a white linen hat, and they all carried fishing rods.

Had I a fishing line I should have stolen quietly up behind the aspens and dropped my bait under the overhanging leaves. But these youngsters, with much noise and shouting, flung out their thick lines and big corks into the sun-bathed water and settled down, with that singleness of purpose so typical of the small boy, to watch their large white-painted floats. Of course, all the fish left that area of the pond and came swimming up to me, as I stood in the green shadow of the trees!

When the boys sat down, the tall grass and weeds almost hid them, I could just glimpse the top of a white sun hat and the tip of a rod. Not a breath of wind stirred the rounded masses of the elm trees, a sleepy stillness was over all. I think that even the boys nodded over their floats. Sometimes a pike swirled out in the sunlit centre of the large pond and dragonflies flew in and out of the shadows. Buttercup gold and hemlock lace, the smell of the hawthorn, and the warm yellow water! What peace, what English summer peace!

In such weather one cannot help recalling other summer afternoons, tennis parties and pretty girls in gay frocks, tea on the lawn under the old cedar, happy peaceful times.

The Derby was run yesterday at Newmarket, and thousands were there, and they came by car. A poor show in these times. It will give the impression abroad that we are not putting our backs into the war. Sport plays a great part in the average Englishman's make-up and this, in itself, is not a bad thing, if not carried too far. I suppose the Englishmen who hunted the

fox during the Peninsular war showed the same spirit. But what people do not realize in these days is that if once Hitler became 'top dog' he could hold his victims under; modern weapons of war have altered everything. Tanks and aeroplanes are superior to rifles. He who has command of the air has won the war.

June 20th. The mayflies' hour

At eleven o'clock this morning Cecily and I decided the heat was unbearable and that we must have a swim. So we bundled up our costumes and towels and fifteen minutes later we were walking across the golden meadow to the stream. There was scarcely a cloud anywhere. A whitish glare quivered on the horizon, which means hot weather in England. Whinchats were calling anxiously from the telegraph wires along the railway bank, 'U tack-tack, U tack-tack', their stub tails jerking. They build somewhere along the embankment every summer.

The creases in our shoes were soon thick with gold pollen, the heat beat back from the parched grass into our faces. Soon we reached the willow pool. It was in half shade, shoals of roach could be seen basking just under the surface. In a moment we had stripped and entered the sparkling shallows, where the deliciously cool water crinkled round our toes. We waded deeper, sending the minnow shoals darting before us from the amber depths under the willow root and the next moment I had 'punted' off, the cool water lapping and meeting behind my back in a delicious embrace. I swam under the shadow of the big willow, numerous mayflies were close to my eyes and nose. Some were drowned, others were lightly resting on the surface. I turned and came back against the current. The ripples lapping my either cheek, were greatly magnified, for I was looking along the surface of the pool.

In the distance I could see the buttercups in the meadow and the thick bushes, heavy with white blossom, and I could smell the water, a 'wild' rushy smell, as it parted in a miniature bow-wave on either side of my nostrils. Then round again, letting the current bear me, oaring myself along with light strokes as though I were a boat. In her rose-bud bathing costume, Cecily looked like a naiad, her coloured scarf knotted round her fair hair, and a rebellious curl escaping over one eye.

Then we came out and lay among the meadow grass and let the warm rays stream over our white bodies and watched the mayflies dancing. We were right down among the buttercups, the shiny yellow goblets were above us, and overhead floated the mayflies, *up*, with a flitting of gauze-like wings, *down*, with a parachute motion, their long thread-like tails turned upwards. A small heath butterfly appeared and chased one of them, the twain went dancing away over the flowers.

Then all at once the mayflies seemed tired of dancing, they all settled on the grass, and looking up the course of the brook I saw that all the other countless thousands had done the same, barely one insect was on the wing. But after about five minutes the dance began again, as far as the eye could see, all up the course of the Folly. Some, locked together in mid air, fell into the grass, others whose brief life was over, winged back to the stream, closing their wings and falling on to the surface of the pool. I watched one mayfly struggling, resting and struggling again, as it was borne slowly away by the current, sending minute rings outwards.

A dim shape appeared beneath, there was a flash of silver and a fat roach sucked it down. This happened to several other exhausted insects which drifted by.

What a lovely summer dream it is when the mayflies dance! How strange is their life! For two years these fairy-like creatures have been living a worm-like grub-existence in the sand and mud of the stream bed. Millions of other grubs must even now be below the water, waiting for just such another glorious summer day *next year*. Ice has roofed them in, covered with snow, the bitter winds of winter have blown across the dreary winter fields, long winter nights have given place to grey days. Two years for this, the mating dance in the June sunshine, this brief hour of glory.

When the sun sinks they will die. Many, I am certain, committed suicide. I saw countless hundreds deliberately fall into the stream. I rescued one and it flew back to the water, closed its wings, and fell.

But the story of the mayfly is well known, as well known as the life of the ant and the bee. There is little difference between the mayflies and ourselves. Taking that well-known simile, we also have been in darkness and nothingness since time began, and now live out our happy hour. Measuring our own span with that of the age of the earth we know there is little difference between our own span and that of the mayflies. So, lie still among the buttercups, live in this hour, content! Perhaps the day will come when we can have more of this glory of the sun, and the wonderful world, when we do not have to spend these precious days in office and factory, in grime, dust, and darkness. Looking at the surface of the pool I glimpsed a dramatic happening. I saw one nymph come to the surface, a curious creature, with legs, grub-like, hideous. As I watched, the skin split, and out popped the fly. It rested for a second on the surface then took the air. I saw it fly over the meadow where it would undergo its fourth, and last, transformation to the perfect insect.

Midsummer's Day. The silver roach

A true midsummer's day with the sun fairly roasting. Cecily and I took a fishing rod, net, and bottle of 'squashed apple' and again went up the

Folly. At the willow pool we found ourselves forestalled by a herd of brown cattle which, standing in the shallows, had fouled the water. So we had to push on up the valley to find some other place. We could find no other pool however, all were too weedy, so we lay under an old willow and watched the mayflies until it became cooler. Then I went down the stream a little way and came to a stretch which was shallow and very narrow. The water, pent up between the banks, swept down with some force. Hearing a loud splash I saw a fish struggling in the current and as I stepped closer the whole narrow stream became alive with splashing, frightened roach.

I ran back for the net and putting it at the base of the 'run' I immediately felt it grow heavy. The roach, unable to face the force of the current, were swept back into it, and with one scoop I had at least fifteen fat roach flipping on the grass.

Others, seeing me standing there, darted back upstream, swimming with all their might, and a few of the stronger fish actually won through and made the upper calmer water. The majority came back past me however, I could feel their cold bodies brushing my bare legs.

Cecily then went up above the calmer water and began to wade towards me and I saw a lot more fish coming down. Suddenly I felt a sudden weight in the net and lifting it out I deposited a monster roach, of nearly two pounds, on the grass.

After this somewhat childish, but delightful, interlude, we found a deeper pool lower down the stream where we could swim. The current took us and we went 'for a row'.

The banks were steep and the stream narrow, reed blades and meadow sweet hung over us as we drifted along. A water rat's life must be very jolly!

Down on the water level all scale was altered, the sedges seemed as big as trees. Delicious!

June 22nd. Fee! Fi! Fo! Fum!

Germany marched on Russia at 4 a.m. this morning.

Old blind man's comment. 'It's the beginning of the end for us!' But I seem to have heard that before, when Greece was invaded. It is real 'battle' weather, I think the sun must heat Hitler's blood. Lovely sunlight seems to affect him in this way. In early March he sniffed the spring air with his stoatish nose and said 'I feel so well!' What he smells is blood! blood! blood! In such weather he will invade England (if ever he does), but his fee! fi! fo! fum! will not disturb phlegmatic John Bull.

Our Sunday joint was maggots and consequently the dogs had a right royal feed or, as the farmers term it, a 'fill belly'. But it is no joke for us,

when meat is so precious. It is half-past nine by the sun and now so hot that the atmosphere is quite exhausting.

June 24th. Midsummer Meads. Bees. Cuckoos

A FEW shy dog roses are out and for the first time I noticed that 'mid-summer' appearance of the fields as Cecily and I went again to the Folly Brook.

Looking across the meadows I could see the red sorrel heads waving in the wind and four hundred yards away a vivid band of yellow mustard in front of an old barn. Starling flocks, the young of the year, were down among the grass. The buttercup gold was rusting.

No roach were in the swift shallows today, though the sun was hot. I must have chanced upon a mass migration, possibly they were bent on spawning, though the time was late. There was only one fish in the swift current.

The cut grass in the fields lies in fragrant silvery swathes and the clatter of the cutter adds yet another dreamy sound to the great symphony of summer. Coming home I almost put my foot on a mallard duck. She burst from under my feet like a bomb and flew away, low, for the distant hedge and settled among the buttercups with just her head showing. A multitude of cheeps arose from round my feet and we saw eight mallard ducklings, newly hatched, scurrying in all directions. Then they all came together in a slight hollow of the ground, I could have put my hat over them and caught the lot. Unfortunately we have now no broody hen, otherwise I might have attempted to rear them. Wild duckling do well when reared in this way, though one must be careful to keep them out of water or they will get cramp. This is strange, as in their wild state they enter the water almost as soon as they are hatched.

The cuckoos continue to bother us at twilight, keeping the whole village awake. I suggested to the Sergeant he should arrest them for being a public nuisance. Sergt. Jerrow is a genial soul, a typical village policeman in appearance. Oft I meet him down the twilit lanes 'trundling' along on his cycle to keep an appointment on his beat.

Late tonight I saw our genial Vicar by his front gate smoking a pipe before going to bed. We talked awhile in the strong scent of laurel flowers, as the swifts screamed overhead. He is a great bee keeper and told me an interesting thing he had noticed about these diligent little people.

He noticed one bee returning to the hive so laden with pollen that it could scarcely fly. It fell on the alighting board in front of the hive and was quite exhausted and unable to move. In a little while two other bees emerged and helped it in to the hive, one on either side!

Near the Vicarage gates are telephone wires, and the bees, heavy laden

with treasure from the golden summer fields and gay gardens sometimes fail to clear them.

Some, more experienced, attain a good 'ceiling' before approaching the wires but frequently fall like stones, after successfully crossing the obstacle, so exhausted are they by the effort.

The chaffinch brood under my dressing room window flew two days ago. What happened to them is something of a mystery. Cecily saw two on the silver birch by the pool, ten yards from the nest, and they have not been seen since. One youngster remained in the nest for one day after his brothers and sisters had flown and was fed diligently by the parent birds. Then it too vanished, and I have seen no trace of them since. They left an addled egg behind and we are leaving it in the nest to remind us of these summer hours, when grey November comes again. Then I will look at the dragged little lichen cup in the plum tree and think on these days.

The garden is not so green and fresh as it was; like the hedges and fields it is hinting at summer's end, it appears slightly 'blowzy'. As I write these lines a magnificent thick-bodied dragonfly has darted past and settled on the ivy at the head of the pool. I suspect he was hatched in the adjacent water. These thick-girthed insects, blue, tawny, and brown, used to fill me with unspeakable dread as a child. I think most insects which sting and look as though they *might* sting, are feared by children. The blue of the thick-bodied dragon fly is an exquisite colour, a sort of love-in-the-mist blue. I suppose that were I a really first class naturalist I should be able to give its correct Latin name, but I cannot.

The last days of June. Cows in the heat

THE COWS were standing in the willow pool this afternoon, sterns outwards, heads under the spreading hawthorns, whisking their tails so that they splashed the water, swinging and tossing their poor tortured heads, first to one flank then to another, eyes continuously assaulted by multitudes of torturing flies, fearfully apprehensive of the sudden cruel dagger-thrust of the warble flies.

The agony caused by these viscous insects must indeed be great; all the time the cattle stand under the trees or attempt to brave the heated fields they are haunted by this fear of intense pain, you can see it in their eye and their nervous movements. This particular fly must possess a very strong and sharp needle to pierce the thick hides and their dagger thrusts must go deep.

One cow came trotting across the hill, tail erect like a charging buffalo—eyes wide with pain. It saw its companions under the trees, standing knee-deep in the cool water, and swung clumsily in to join them.

'Splash, splash,' the tortured beast waded into the shallows and stood a

moment, tossing its head. Its mouth was slavering from the sudden mad rush across the heated pasture. I heard a low hum, like the drone of many large bees in formation, and I saw a large brown insect buzz under its flank. A second's pause, then a loud snort, and every beast in the pool panicked. The victim, stung a second time, wheeled round, sending the yellow, churned water flying in all directions, then it dashed away up the steep bank, spurning the powdery sand to right and left.

The others, after stamping and grunting under the tree, moved restlessly into the deeper water until it ran along their rough stomachs. For a time nothing happened, now and again one beast stamped a foot or swung a tail, and relieved itself in the water. In hot weather I have noticed cattle suffer much from diarrhoea, but whether this is due to the heat or to nervousness I do not know.

Distant cattle could be seen, charging about with tails erect, bobbing along the far hill-top where the sun beat down, causing a quiver over the heated earth. How hot it must be on that far hillside! No shade anywhere, just scorched grass in which the grasshoppers shrilled.

A farmer told me the other day of a curious fact. He had never noticed them 'blow' after running in the hot sun, yet cattle driven quietly along a road at walking pace soon begin to gasp for breath, even when the weather is cool.

Few clouds were visible in the sky, only thin-wisped veils, far up in the summer blue. Dragonflies darted across the stream, some green, some brown, others a rich dark blue, with spots on their wing-tips. The first meadow-brown bobbed past; in a few days these pastures will be alive with them. From somewhere close at hand came the sweetly rank scent of elder flower in full bloom. Sweet summer days!

I looked down into the forests of the grass and saw a wonderful pattern of seed-heads and purple clover. The shadow of the willow tree moved almost imperceptibly across the grass until the sun's scorching rays were quite screened. I felt the burning heat leave my leg, which had been in full sunlight. The mayflies have gone, the brooding heat fills every hollow of the hills. I think of all England lying under this heat, of sweaty soldiers toiling across the chalk downs of Wiltshire, of men working, working without shade of any sort. What an idle countryman I am, to be sure! What peace and rest here . . . sweet summer by the Folly!

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CHAPTER V

Summer

July 2nd. Small Copper

The sullen heat continues, most oppressive at midday when the fierce rays are softened by vapour. The Small Coppers chase each other over the burnt grass, their minute brick-red wings seem to suggest heat, as does the swallow's throat.

This little butterfly has a great attraction for me; as a child I loved it, I do still. When the wings are closed they are a very beautiful sandy fawn on the outside, which harmonizes wonderfully well with the scorched grass of torrid summer-lands. I noticed a few more meadow-browns this afternoon. When at rest upon the grass or thistle tops they seem to look at you out of the round painted eyes at the tips of their wings. I always used to think they saw me coming because I could never catch them with my hands. They recall hot hayfields, and 'tea' in the hay, and prickles down one's neck. 'Tea in the hay' was always a tickly business.

The meadow browns sidle on the thistle tops or on the cut dry swathes, watching your approach. Steal up never so quietly you cannot 'tweak' them between thumb and finger, in the way we used to catch the handsome red admirals in the old Rectory garden. In these same hayfields were many yellow underwing moths; on disturbing a swathe they would fly out swiftly, far too swiftly for a boy to catch, and then, if you watched their line of flight, they would again alight among the grass and the hunt would begin again.

Summer-blue butterflies were also about in the clover today, chasing each other in the sunlight, careering over the burnt grasslands. By the Folly the dragonflies were everywhere, far more abundant than the other

day, and sedge-warblers churred and chattered among the cool sedges. I could glimpse them ever and again as they peeped at us from among the slender reed forests.

Stout flies were also in evidence, settling softly and biting deeply. Elspeth was bitten on her bare back as she sat by the stream side, two tiny beads of blood sprang from her white skin.

We found the cattle in the willow pool again so we could not bathe there. We went higher up the brook to where I caught the roach. I saw one glorious insect, not unlike a mayfly but with bigger wings, of an exquisite grey blue colour. A few mayflies were still about but the main hatch is over.

A song thrush still visits the rockery pool for mud. She is building in the spinney across the meadow, for a second, or possibly a third, brood. If this little pond were not so close to my house the martins and swallows would come to it for plaster.

Tonight the sun, as big as a harvest moon, sank in a bank of mist, looking like a gigantic rose-red cheese. Five bombers, Germany bound, thrummed over in the soft light. Perhaps one of those pilots was looking down on this quiet summer England for the last time, and was taking a farewell look at the woods and fields which were dimming in the evening mist. It is dreadful to think of.

When twilight falls, the frogs in the pond become extremely active, croaking to one another and swimming across from side to side. Others, damp and wide-eyed, solemnly climb out and go away up the garden path catching flies, where the antirrhinums are knotting up to bloom. In the heat of the day they retire to the cool crevices of the rocks and hide under the hanging tresses of aubretia which drip down to the pool's surface. One always takes up his position under the miniature waterfall. Sensible reptile!

July 7th. Odds and Ends

THE heat continues unabating. Out of the South blows a hot wind, sure accompaniment to drought. In such weather Hudson must have journeyed over the South downs and felt the unrefreshing wind on his cheek. Roger sent me a box of butterflies from Canada, collected by himself, including a Monarch (Milkweed) and Camberwell Beauty, all collected on June 2nd and 4th of this year.

The exotic swallow-tails are too gaudy for my liking, they show the same extravagance of colouring displayed in Indian butterflies.

Last night I motor-cycled back from L, on the little two-stroke. Jogging, or rather purring along, at about 25 m.p.h. I had time to smell all the delicious evening perfumes of hedge and wood. As I travelled steadily down the

little narrow lanes a succession of country smells greeted me, now elders (which was the most predominating and powerful summer smell), now newly-cut hay (lying just over the hedge), now honeysuckle and rose bay. This joy of many smells is denied to the traveller by car. Even in an open car you are whirled along at too great a pace to enjoy any of these things. The great drawback to a motor cycle is that it is so noisy, the fusillade of the engine drowns the country sounds.

I stopped by Scotland Wood and shut off the engine. Before me lay the winding deserted road, elm and oak, heavy in leaf, were hanging over the grass verge on either side. Not a breath of wind moved the trees. A song thrush was singing deep in the hazels, the rich and exquisite notes seemed to make the air vibrate. Few other birds were singing. Away in the distance a rabbit moved out of the grass verge and sat up, looking in my direction. Then it crept over the road—hoppity, hoppity—and vanished.

Looking at all this cover, the thick curtained hedges draped with honeysuckle and old man's beard, the thick spinneys and undulating field banks, I could not help thinking that the advance guard of an invading army should not be able to move a yard without being subjected to a murderous fire.

But the average countryman, surprising as it may seem, has little idea of concealment and the art of camouflage. How pitiful were those mouldering sandbags one saw down every lane in the early days of the 'L.D.V.'; the frail tumble-down carts, the pathetic little piles of wood which would serve better warming some hearth. The natural cover of hedge and ditch is often ignored. People like myself, who have stalked wild animals with a rifle, know how to take cover; keepers (intelligent keepers) and gillies, all know the advantage of 'dead' ground. Every nettle bunch could hide a resolute sniper, each mossy bracken bank a cunningly concealed anti-tank gun. The eyes of the airman could never spot you, deep down under the leaves and among the stinging nettles, there would be hidden death at every yard.

Even in winter there is enough cover to conceal a well-trained rural army; but the Home Guard is still taught to fight on the lines of the Army instead of Guerrilla tactics.

The Boers, with very little in the way of natural cover, dealt us some shrewd blows in the South African war. In these days of modern arms, Bren, anti-tank guns, and high power grenades, the rustic soldier should be able to fight delaying actions with the finest army in the world, which is probably Germany's.

At about 11.30 tonight I stood among my little birch trees and watched a dignified procession of our heavy bombers heading for Brest, all with

drooped tails which denoted they were 'in bomb', heavy laden and pregnant with death.

Hardly had one departed to the South when another hove in sight to the East, first as a mere soundless speck against the saffron sky. Then came the droning throb of its engine as it passed high overhead. It was a quietly dramatic spectacle, the calm summer night with the moon nearly at the full, rising over the rounded elms beyond the cricket pitch, the wheeling screaming swifts hawking about the church tower, and these purposeful steady-flying birds of vengeance passing in stately array across the skies. I have seen a battle fleet of great ships put to sea, but this battle fleet of winged air-power was just as dramatic. In an hour or two, when all these little villages are wrapt in sleep (the farm labourers and all who work on the land are already a-bed), those high flying bombers will be in the Valley of the Shadow, ringed with vicious spurts of Ack Ack fire. God send them safely home, I say.

I saw a mallard duck swimming with her brood yesterday, with only her head above water and all the ducklings thickly clustered about her so that she was hardly recognisable as a bird.

July 8th. Hawking House Martins

It was an evening of menacing haze, almost of fog. The horizon was cloaked with a curious blight, despite the fact the wind blew with some violence, and it was a cold wind.

Occasionally one gets an evening like this round about high summer. It was not thundery or oppressive, unless it was oppressive to the spirit. I can only liken it to a November atmosphere transported into July.

Taking the little '22 rifle with the telescopic sight I wandered down beside the old fishponds. I have written of these ponds in another book, of how great a part they played in my childhood. In those days they were fine sheets of water, now, in the course of thirty years, all have grown up with rush and willow.

In the upper pool there is no visible water remaining, even in winter when the vegetation has died down there is only a narrow trickle at one end. Nevertheless, it has still a very powerful attraction. It is surrounded by tall thick trees, elms and oaks mostly, and one magnificent horse chestnut.

Standing beside the wild rose bush on its western shore I was reminded of a large green bowl of rushes; their tips were all of an even height, shut in by the high walls of the tree masses.

Though there was a high wind blowing out in the field it was quite calm at this spot and a company of house martins had all gathered together and were circling about over the rushes, making a continuous musical twitter as they caught the insects.

One notices this phenomenon very frequently on a windy day in summer. Millions of almost invisible insects gather in the lee of trees to be out of the wind. These martins were having a wonderful feed. The insects were like shoaling fish and the martins were the fishermen. No small wonder they twittered so excitedly!

I stood close to the fence watching them narrowly for quite half-an-hour. In front of me was the marsh, with the silvery willow leaves and pink spires of willow herb, beyond that a jungle of hairy water dock leaves, and beyond that again the level sea of bright green rush. On the far side was the impenetrable wall of massive trees. Only their very tops were agitated by the strong wind. The foliage was so thick the air was almost windless where I stood.

How gracefully these martins hawked about in the quiet air! Some ascended in sudden swoops, others played together and chased each other, but all were describing a circle, never leaving the shelter of the trees. They flew very close to me, some darted within a foot or two of my face. So intent were they on their fly catching they never noticed me. The little white spots on their rumps were quite dazzling to watch, as they weaved in all directions against the dark green background.

In the distance, between the gaps in the tree-trunks on the far side of the pond, I could see red sorrel heads showing in a deep rusty-pink stain on the mowing grass. In a day or two the field will be cut, now the grass is waist high.

A large black bomber came throbbing out of the mist. For quite an hour it circled about over Kelmarsh tunnel, behaving in a most suspicious manner. The engine sounded sinister too, it reminded me of the days when the German planes were always prowling about the sky, it had the same intermittent booming throb which sounded like 'for you, for you, for you'. Very occasionally I caught a glimpse of it appearing and disappearing into the ominous fog. Perhaps the pilot was lost and was endeavouring to pick up his bearings. (On the late news we heard a German plane had dropped bombs on Leamington, just about the time I saw this bomber. Whether there was any connection I do not know.)

But all my attention was attracted by these trim little martins as they circled and twittered in this quiet place.

From the rushy marsh all manner of strange poignant summer scents came to me, all sweetly rank. And my eye dwelt lovingly on the intricate pattern of the marsh itself, the silver willows were a joy. I remember as a boy finding a turtle dove's nest in these marsh withies. The bird was sitting and it was the first turtle dove's nest I had ever found, also it was my first close view of a turtle dove. I remember my intense excitement, I thought it must be some kind of rare 'crake'.

In actual fact water-rails still breed in this upper pond for I have found and seen the young and heard the parent birds. And later on there is sure to be a mallard family. They love this quiet rushy place set around with tall trees. But the shy birds will not tarry long. Close by is the main road and ducks do not like too much disturbance and noise. As I stood beside the briar bush and the willows a fine cock reed sparrow slipped up a willow stem and looked about him, a handsome bunting with his clean white collar and black poll. The brown on his back matches the reed mace heads.

He glanced about him, but did not see me, for a willow branch partly screened me and I was standing very still. From across the sea of rushes I heard the clap of a pigeon's wing and raising my eyes to the trees I saw it, perched on the bough of an ash tree ninety yards distant.

The little rifle came silently to the shoulder and in a minute I had got the cross thread of the 'scope upon him. He was so far off he looked, even through the 'scope, an impossible shot. However, I held my breath, and the target coming clear for a second, I gently squeezed the trigger.

I never saw the pigeon leave the branch. All I heard was the indescribable thud of the bullet going home.

I walked round the fence and stood under the tree. Below me the embankment between the two ponds sloped steeply down, choked with nettles which were quite waist high. Somewhere in that mass of stinging weeds lay my pigeon. Of that I was certain. So I scrambled down the bank and in a little while came upon it, a fine fat bird. He was in perfect plumage and had been so cleanly killed I could not at first find where my bullet had struck him. At any rate it had been a grand sporting shot, for when I paced out the range it was nearly a hundred yards. So there will be one pigeon less to raid the harvest field when the corn is 'shocked up'.

July 10th. The Forest

THIS date, given in the butterfly books as the time of emergence of *Aputura Iris* (Purple Emperor) suggested that it would be an auspicious time to pay a visit to the forest. We arrived soon after eleven a.m. with the sun (which has been overcast for four solid weeks) just gathering power.

The sunlight had a misty quality, no breeze moved the oak crowns, not one cloud was visible in the whole expanse of sky. On either hand banks of wild rose and sloe hid the root of the oaks and here and there honeysuckle twined about. The fragrance of these two flowers was mingled into an exquisite perfume. There had been no dew, the rank vegetation was quite dry. I soon saw the first silver washed fritillary arrowing past, as gold as a sovereign. I have often written of this exquisite butterfly. When seen on the wing, the rich fulvous gold, swiftly passing, seems to leave a line of light along the dark background of bushes and trees.

The white admirals were out, some newly hatched. In all I must have seen about two hundred perfect insects. I saw only two tattered specimens and I was at last able to replace those in my cabinet by really good insects. Unless the white admirals are captured soon after emergence they become faded and torn, for they are much preyed upon by dragonflies and birds. Having collected eight fine specimens I left the rest alone. To see a rare butterfly in flight is worth any amount pinned out on the cabinet cork. Curiously enough I did not see many silver washed. I only caught one, though I made many attempts to catch others. Their flight is so swift, they 'career' rather than fly down the ridings, and for the most part keep well up out of reach of the net. It is wonderful to watch them passing back and forth into the sunlight and out again, now sailing with wings held downwards like a gliding partridge, now beating high round the oak tops so that the eye can scarcely follow. In vain did I search for Iris. But I captured two Pruni (black hair streak) in good condition and saw many more. I had no idea this species was so rare until I looked him up in my book; the Purple Emperor is common by comparison! It is also priced higher than Iris in Watkins and Doncaster's catalogue. It is a queer, unobtrusive little butterfly. Both specimens I caught were on privet. I saw quite thirty more.

After midday the sun became tropical. C and I made our way past the woodcutter's house where a dog barked at us, and a woman stared from the back garden. Not far away, in a sallow-girt clearing backed by ancient oaks, I put out a small bird from some thick cover. It had a rounded, longish tail and was of the warbler family. In colour greyish green. I could not identify it.

We lay for some time in the shade of some nut bushes by the edge of a ride, watching the white admirals flickering about the lower branch of an oak. Wood whites, white admirals, a silver washed, meadow browns and ringlets and occasionally a speckled wood passed us; it was a delight to watch them all.

Poor Busy, the retriever who was with us, was much bothered by the flies. She buried her head deep in the grass and panted, once she pushed her nose under my arm.

On we went again and as we came round a corner I smelt new-mown grass. The old woodcutter was scything a little way up the riding. He wore an ancient Panama on his head and his seamed tanned face reminded me of the bark of an oak, able to withstand any weather. He told me he had been employed as keeper in an adjoining forest in days gone by, he had lived there for over thirty years and had been in his present job for six.

I asked him whether he had ever seen any Iris in the forest. 'Ah! that I 'ave, two years back, ain't seen any since. One gentleman who came caught two in an afternoon.'

'Where?' I asked him.

'Why, in this 'ere ride!'

And I could well believe it. The high oaks were there, *and* the willow, the stage was all set for his Imperial Majesty. It was just after a heavy shower of rain, he told me, and he had seen one come down from the trees after the moisture in the ride. He went on to tell me of rare birds. Merlins had nested not far away the year before, but I suspect that they were Hobbies, as the merlin is a bird of the moors.

Last winter, he said, he shot eight deer, the year before, fifteen. No, he didn't eat them himself, he couldn't fancy deer's meat, so he had sold them to friends in the neighbouring County Town.

'And how do you get on in the winter?' I asked.

'Oh, we gets along all right Sir, you see I've lived in the woods all me life, since I was a nipper. Me father was a keeper in a State forest you see. We gets in a store of food o' course, before the bad winter weather, and we don't leave the forest much. We gets along all right, we manage.'

'Well,' said I, 'you've got a lovely place to live in!'

'Yes Sir, we likes it all right, we've always lived in the woods, always.'

Lucky man thought I. A few miles distant were hot pavements and smelly houses, sticky air, the reek of cheap scent, elbowing humanity. Here all was so calm, clean and cool, the scents of the forest were all about us. He told me the 'small birds' were not so numerous as formerly and hawks were rarer, despite the fact they were not unduly persecuted. In the years before the first German War they were common and the forest was well kept then. Now there were no keepers but the hawks had gone, and owls were not so common as they used to be. Sometimes, when bombs fell in the vicinity, the forest seemed to shiver, so he said, even the sturdy oaks trembled. I could not help picturing this great tract of woodland at midnight, with those almost human trees crowding round his little shack, silvered in moonlight, and the dim half-seen flowerets of the wild hemlock along the riding edge, the countless twisting rides, some narrow, others mere footpaths, forsaken maybe but for a listening fox or rabbit.

This forest could tell some tales no doubt. Ancient coins have been found under the oaks. Roman coins some of them. It could tell of many a Royal hunting party and of affrighted deer and boar, possibly bears too, for this forest has been here for many generations.

I realized it had a spacious dignity and peace such as is only found in great cathedrals, a sense of almost holy antiquity. It could tell many a tale of past tempests and bitter winters. During the first German War a Zeppelin, mistaking the gloom of the forest beneath for a town, loosed off a stick of bombs right into the middle of it. What a fright the animals must

have had when those bombs spouted up and out! How the deer must have run for their lives and the rabbits and foxes rushed to ground! If this countryside were invaded it would no doubt have more tales to tell, a whole army corps could be hidden here. I hope it will live for many generations yet, giving shade to the traveller and sanctuary to the hunted, and that it will continue to bring, each summer, a fresh harvest of wild creatures into the world.

July 11th. Iris again

A BREATHLESS small boy came to me tonight with the news that a Purple Emperor had been seen in a neighbouring wood. Apparently his friend had been standing in a riding when a fritillary flew past pursued by a Purple Emperor!

When an attempt was made to capture it, it had flown up to the top of a nearby oak. The story sounded true, but small boys are unreliable.

July 16th. More butterfly hunts

THE heat wave has gone and rain has come, but a bright spell this morning prompted me to call for my parson friend, who is as keen as myself on 'bug hunting', and together we went to Lord Rothschild's place near Oundle. On the way, just beyond Barnwell I said to 'G.J.', 'In a moment or two we shall see the first marbled white.' And sure enough, as we came to a certain stretch of road, I saw a dusky butterfly flopping over the grass. In the next few minutes many more passed us.

It is curious how the Marbled White keeps to its own particular territory. Year after year I have found them along this section of the road. It is, to my eye, a singularly handsome insect, in its harmonizing colours of black checks and sulphur yellow. Its very flight betrays a happy-go-lucky and lazy nature. It flops, rather than flies, and is as easy as the Wood White to capture. It flies along as though its wings were wet with dew. Incidentally it is the only British butterfly which lays its eggs as it flies. Other more respectable and careful insects settle on a grass stem or weed head but with disgraceful sang-froid the Marbled White drops its egg like a bomb as it wanders along.

When we reached Ashton the sun went in. We saw Polebrook church, where the Reverend Bree (curate of Polebrook in the 19th century) must have preached on many a hot summer afternoon, his mind no doubt wandering to the rides of the adjacent oak woods where the Purple Emperor was found. I sensed the leisure and the peace of those far-off times when men were content with simple things.

We had some difficulty in locating the 'Cabin Plain', as it had grown up considerably since J's last visit.

The sun came out with full power and silver washed appeared on all sides in great numbers, some settling on the golden rod and blackberry flowers. I saw one or two white admirals and two W Album but nothing else. We caught two silver washed in coition and J secured them alive, still joined together. He put them away in his box and hopes to breed from them. It should be an interesting experiment.

He told me that Iris *does* occur at Ashton to this day, but only as a rarity. We scanned the oak trees in vain, the only butterflies visible being a few Hairstreaks.

Soon after midday the sun went sulkily behind vaporous cloud and thunder threatened. No butterflies were on the wing, save the meadow browns, who do not mind whether the sun shines or not.

We came back by way of Barnwell Wold, and a brief sun gleam set a rushy field alive with dark green Fritillaries and Marbled Whites. Once the Large Blue occurred here but it has not been seen for many years. The Barnwell variety was the largest and most brilliantly coloured form, the Southern specimens are not so fine.

The year is showing signs of middle age. In the fields the corn and wheat stands strong and thick; the recent rains have done wonders. All the hay is 'in' and the aftermath shows a yellowish green, black with nodding rooks and busy starlings. 'Cuckoo time' seems a long while ago, so quickly do the days go by, and I have not seen the swifts of late, they seemed to depart with the hot weather. But they must still be about somewhere for it is too early for them to migrate.

Another war-winter lies before us; life becomes harder every day, but I suppose it is good for us to have a little chastening here at home.

July 21st. Portrait of Wilson

I HAVE been working all day pulling thistles out of potato rows. It took us an hour to do each row, for it was a big field and the thistles grew thickly. My mate was Wilson. On the far side of him was Sam, stone deaf and with a tiny high-pitched squeaky voice. The fourth man was Bottom, straight out of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. I do not think I ever fully realized the genius of Shakespeare until today. Every action, every word, was Bottom's, but nobody besides myself thought him at all humorous, indeed he was taken with as great seriousness as he took himself.

As we worked slowly up the rows, Wilson and I talked, all about those simple country things such as pigs and corn-crakes, sheep and harvest.

'I remembers,' said Wilson, 'I remembers them corncrakes. Never see 'em now. Many's the time I've found their nests, eggs like moor'ens. We used to get 'em round Croft, where I was born. When I was a young man they was common.'

'How long ago was that?'

'Oh, sixty year ago. Times was different then, wages was different an' all I married when I wer twenty two. Sixteen shillin's a week I 'ad as waggoner, an' a family o' ten chillun to kip, arter a bit, all on sixteen bob a week!'

'Yes, and they called them "the good old times"', I said.

Wilson did not answer for a minute. He was engrossed in pulling up a particular stout thistle. It came up with a jerk and a shower of orange earth.

'Ah, there weren't much good about them times I reckon. Sometimes I'd sit up all night wi' a foal or summat an' niver get an extra penny. I used to git a good breakfast though, in the farm'ouse, but that's all. Used to make me mouth water to see the 'ams and sides o' bacon 'anging on the walls. We went 'ungry in those days. Folks didn't give much away, especially them 'as 'ad plenty. An' lots o' folks who 'ave plenty already get more gied 'em; "apple to the orchard" as we used to say. You've missed one there mister'. Wilson parted a potato plant in my row with the end of his hoe, and I saw the grey-green thistle growing in the very heart of the plant.

We worked on in silence. Grey clouds were gliding across the sky, a fine rain fell but not enough to worry one. Wilson straightened his back for a moment. Across the field of barley, over the next hedge, I saw the ripples of wind moving swiftly. Somewhere a lark was singing.

'I used to be a waggoner at Croft. Once I 'ad a rare gelding. Master sent me up wi' 'im to Islington Show and 'ee took fust prize. An' 'ee took fust prize next year too, up in Lunnon, and I went wi' 'im again. The 'ole fellers said, when they seed me cummin', "'ere comes Wilson wi' the old red 'un, you can take all t'others away now". That geldin' should never 'a bin cut, but 'er was the wrong colour they reckoned. That's the only time I bin to Lunnon'.

'When was that?'

Wilson always waited a minute before replying to a question. I thought he had not heard me, but I waited.

'Thirty year ago, Nineteen Twelve. I ain't bin nowhere else. I ain't bin to Birmingham neither. I bin to Coventry though.'

We worked on. The lark still sang and a faint sunbeam chased across the potato flowers and was gone over the far hedge.

He began to talk of winter weather.

'I remembers a winter when we 'ad frost fer ten weeks solid, at Croft. Chap flooded 'is medder for skating and 'ad lights, coloured lights, 'ung all round. Village band played on the ice an' all, a-setting on a platform in the middle, so you can guess 'ow cold it wur. I made a bit be 'iring our chairs fer the folks to set on whiles they put on their skates. 'Ullo! Old Sam's got the cramp agin!'

Sam had dropped his hoe and was bending forwards, his face twisted with pain. Bottom was sympathizing. 'Och! ai! I've got the cramp,' piped Sam in his high falsetto. 'Oh! ah!'

'Pore old feller,' said Wilson loudly to me, 'e 'ad the cramp last year when we wus threshing. Fell off the rick. An' e's that deaf you can 'oller down 'is ear-'ole and 'ee can't 'ear nuthin'.'

We were nearing the end of the row and the thistles grew more thickly. Some were just coming into flower. For a time we worked without talking and the only sound was the 'chump, chump' of our hoes, and a lark singing up in the grey sky. Sam's cramp seemed to have gone as quickly as it came.

'You was talkin' of the old days,' continued Wilson, 'they wur 'ard times, but my missus sometimes says they were the best. Dunno as she ain't right. I've 'eard 'er singing over 'er wash-tub on wash mornin', when I've bin a-ploughin' in the next field, ah, singin' like a lark.'

The old man stood up for a minute and scraped the earth from the blade of his hoe. I could see he was thinking of that far singing coming to him on the sharp winter air.

We had reached the end of the row. 'It's bacca time,' said Wilson, straightening his back.

'I wants me dinner! I wants me dinner!' piped Sam in a plaintive child-like squeak, 'it's dinner time, ain't it?'

Far away on a distant field a tractor was at work and one single white gull was in attendance. I thought of Wilson's hard life, as hard and spare as a wild bird's. The lark had stopped singing, it dived like a stone into the grey-green barley which was still moving in the wind.

'We ain't goin' to 'ave much rain,' said Wilson, his eyes on the luminous sky. Bottom, having finished his row (he had struck a bad one, full of thistles), joined us.

'Ef you come up to the byre tonight, Wilson, I'll larn ye 'ow to milk, ready fer when I go on me 'olidays.'

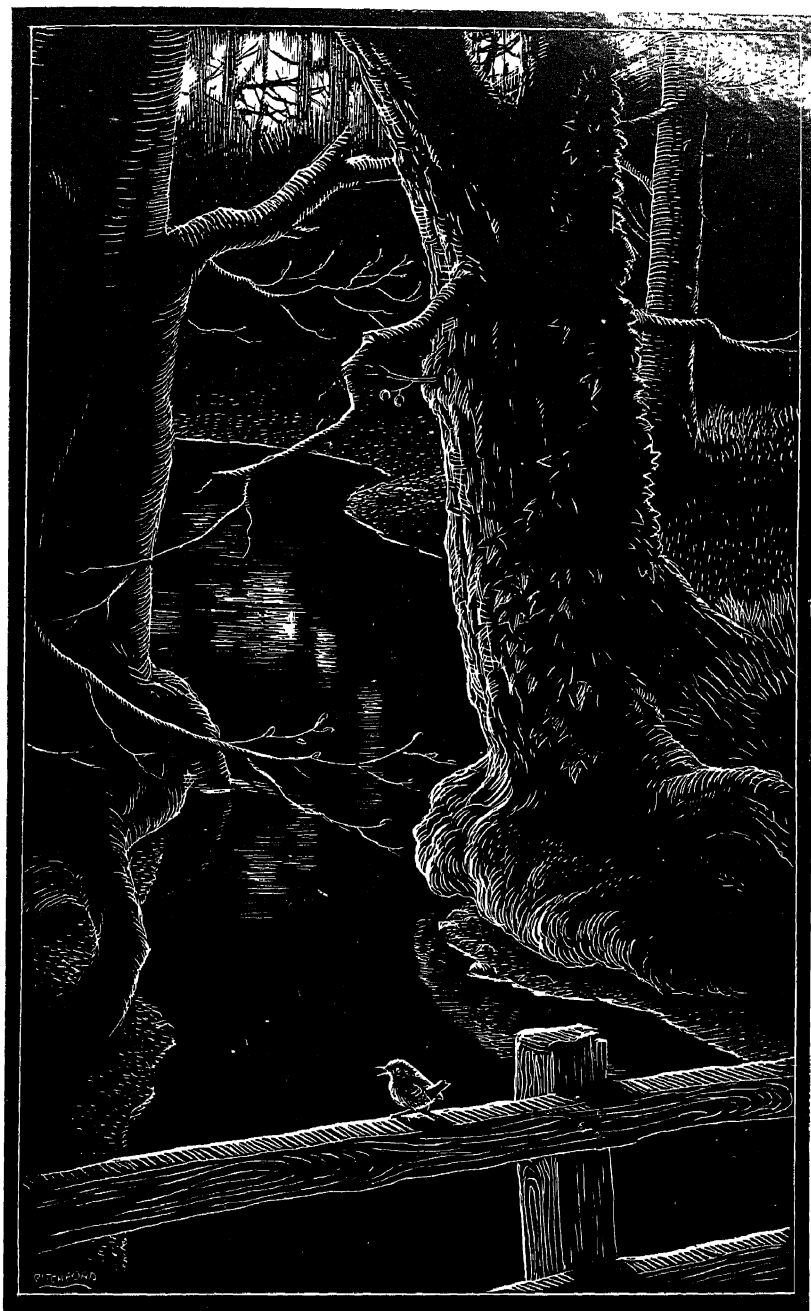
Wilson looked stolidly at Bottom before replying.

'Mebbe I cud teach you,' he said, with a wink at me.

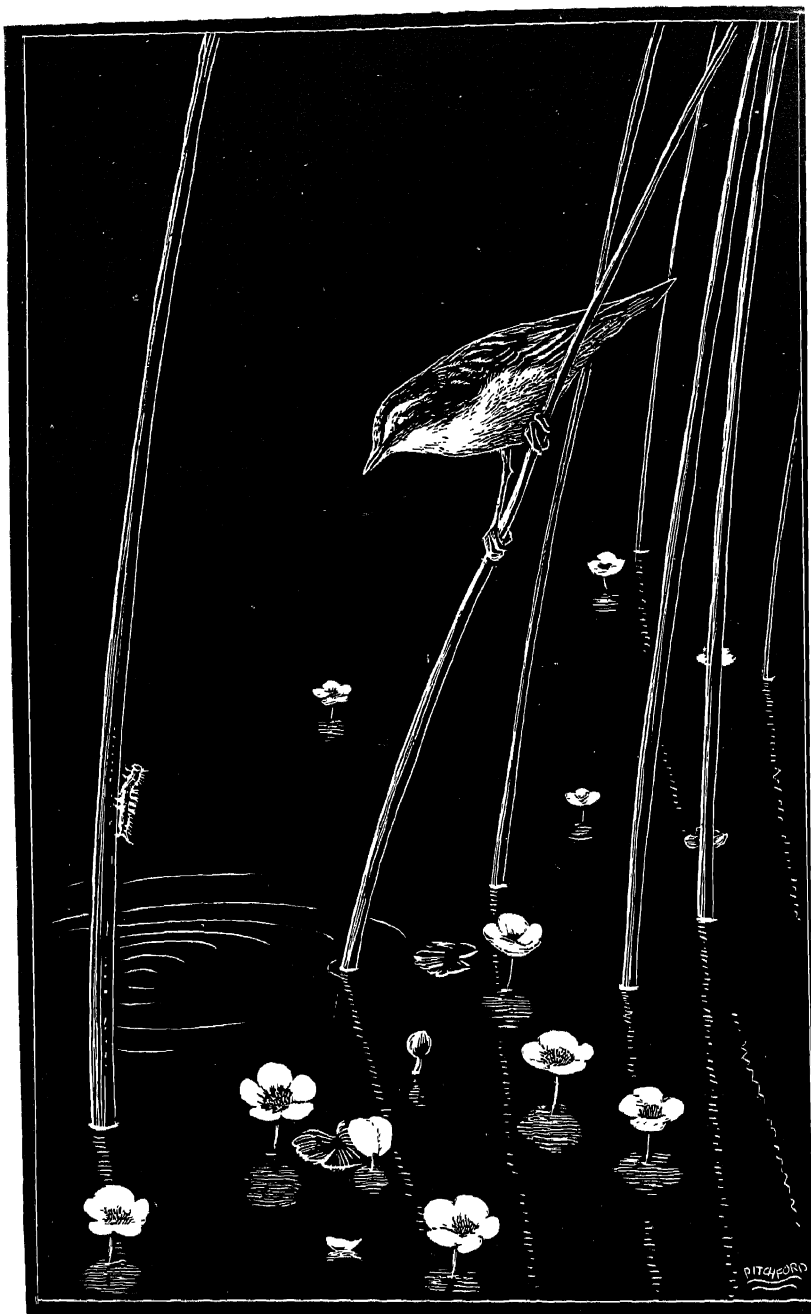
July 22nd. The Jubilee seat

THE lime trees smell sweetly now, they are in full bloom. The scent is most noticeable in close weather and it carries a long distance.

A little way out of the village is an iron seat, erected in commemoration of the Jubilee (George, not Victoria). The lime trees—young trees but very thick—overhang it, close by the grass grows long and lush, save where it has been worn away by the hob-nails of ruminating rustics. The old men sit there most of the day and well into the evening, staring vacantly at passers-by and puffing at their seasoned pipes. Sometimes a dog accom-



The Intimate Charm of an English Stream



Sedge Warbler

pauses them, sometimes one old man occupies the seat alone. The green fly drop from the lime leaves on to his cap but he does not heed them. Looking up into the fabric and pattern of the leafy limes the green fly can be seen in their millions, all on the under side of the leaves. The golden blossoms, which smell so sweetly, hang down, loud with bees, the fragrant scent pervades the air for many yards. Old Mr Wardle is the most constant visitor. His face is an apoplectic red, like a very ripe apple. He is always smoking, though how he manages to get tobacco, or the wherewithal to buy it, is beyond me. The reek of blue shag mingles oddly with the sweet lime scent.

When Mr Wardle was a young man he joined the army, and he often tells of how he marched with his regiment to Windsor to be reviewed by Queen Victoria, and received half-a-crown and a pint of beer. That was not very long after the Crimean war. After that he went to work as a miner (so many of these midland villagers are retired miners), and then he said goodbye to God's good air for many years. He will discuss other things, such as politics, the war, the harvest prospects, pigs, etc., if you happen to chance along and lend an ear. But mostly he sits alone, pulling at his pipe, watching the world go by.

It is just a nice toddle for old legs, this Jubilee seat, under the green and gold lime trees. It's shady too, and there's always something going on, for just across the way is Hadleys' Garage (petrol, oils, cycles repaired) and the current of village life is quickened at that spot, especially just now, when the camouflaged army trucks call for petrol.

Before long the lime trees will be turning to amber, soon the winds of winter will strip them bare and the seat will be forsaken. The rain will shine on the green painted iron and drops of moisture will skate along and hang in pearly rows. The earth, now dusty, worn by hob-nails, will be a sticky morass, and the grass will not be lush and green any more. Sad winds will pipe among the bare lime boughs, there will be no warmth, no cover, no drooping scented branches or cool green layers of leaves.

Mr Wardle will not be seen there, nor any of the other rustics, the cottage firesides will draw them. Like old and worn out dogs they will seek warmth and shelter, and like flies will hibernate under the thatch until an April sun once more tempts them forth, their ranks grown less may be, for the dark reaper reaps his harvest in the grey winter days, when old blood is thin and cold.

But other springs will come; perhaps one day, in the fullness of time, the pimply youth who now works the petrol pumps will be glad to rest out of the summer sun—there will always be an old Mr Wardle on the Jubilee seat.

One astonishing thing puzzled me for a long time about this dear old

man. In the winter, during the bitterest weather, I have seen him without an overcoat. His threadbare jacket was buttoned under his chin and he looked blue with cold.

By roundabout channels I found the reason. It was not because he had no thick coat to put on, but because he could not get his arms into an overcoat without assistance, and his daughter-in-law would not help him on with it. Thus do the poor suffer.

July 27th. Swifts

THE summer passes swiftly, it is now in its ripe middle age. Weeks since, I heard the cuckoo's voice, now he is silent, the days pass in sultry array through much grey weather.

Coming after the drought the sun has put new life into the grass, it is green again with new growth. But the heavy rods of rain have knocked the gold dust from the limes. Mankind still sweats and fights, the growling Russian bear is fighting back savagely with untold heroism, and the mad dog of Europe is being severely mauled.

A few years back we despised the Russians, or at least we regarded them with deep distrust. But they have taught the civilized world a new manliness and courage, which will never be forgotten. Meanwhile we look to the harvest ripening in the fields to see us through the winter. Those days spent with Cecily and Elspeth up the Folly seem very far away.

Last night I watched the swifts again. They have returned to the village. Here is a baffling mystery for you!

Where *do* the male swifts go at night?

When it was almost dark I heard their thin thread-like screams coming down from the dusky vault above, and looking up I saw the whirling band of braves hurtling round at an incredible speed and at a great distance above the earth. So high were they I could barely see them. Their thin screams seemed to be redoubled as I watched them, and then the sounds ceased abruptly and the birds vanished into nothingness. One moment they were there, clearly visible as they passed a cloud, the next, they seemed to dissolve. I have noticed this before, this strange disappearance of the swifts at approach of night. Hudson has a story to tell of the swifts. A herd boy described to him how he had seen the swifts coming down out of the sky at dawn.

Do they sleep on the wing in the upper stratosphere? Do they return to the earth, after dark, to sleep in their nesting quarters? The latter explanation sounds most probable, but *no male swift has been found sleeping at night with the rest of the brood!*

I believe these birds have poor eyesight, at least when they are inside a barn or house. Every year, in a famous Public School library which I

happen to know very well, a swift finds entry. Quite recently a swift found its way in and flew tirelessly up and down trying to get out. I threw up a cloth and by a lucky chance brought it down.

I carried it outside and, to test the saying that a swift, once on the level ground, cannot rise because of the length of his wings and the smallness of his feet, I put it on the gravel. It took wing immediately, without any difficulty whatsoever.

I have more news of a Purple Emperor being captured in a wood in Oxfordshire recently.

My parson friend, J, who collects butterflies and has a profound knowledge of the subject, showed me about ten Painted Lady caterpillars which he had found on some thistles near the village of Naseby. Some had pupated and others were preparing to do so. These chrysalids were most lovely, shot with metallic lustre. The caterpillars were handsome too. J predicts a great season for this particular insect owing to the hot summer. It is a butterfly I am very fond of, the outer wing colouring is even more exquisite than the inside, as the lower wing is marbled with whorls and lines of a curious greenish yellow. On each outer forewing is a spot of the most glorious pink, the colour of a wild rose.

So this hot summer draws on; the world weary with fever, tosses and turns on its sick bed. Japan will soon be against us and the flames will ring the globe.

How serenely that other world of nature pursues its way, unconscious and unaffected by all this turmoil of man's spirit. Is strife part of nature? must there always be wars? perhaps so, maybe it is the price we have to pay for bare existence.

I would like to see those massed squadrons of our air force setting out over the quiet fields of Kent. And I would like to see the Kentish men at work in the fields, taking off their sweaty caps as they pause from turning the hay, waving and cheering at the roaring ships of the sky passing overhead. Perhaps if I were younger I would be up there too. Now I must play a much more lowly part as a member of the Home Guard, the 'old man's army'. Perhaps one day I may get my chance. In the interim we must train for the one big battle we shall ever fight, the real Battle of Britain.

July 28th. Puss Moths

I HAVE just found four beautiful Puss Moth caterpillars, not however the fruits of the union between the moths which I witnessed on June 8th, as they were Poplar Hawks.

I take a certain pride in these handsome moths and a great interest in their welfare. Two of the poplar trees were untouched, but the other two have been stripped. I must have been blind not to have noticed it before.

Though I could see something had been eating the leaves and knew it must be either Puss or Poplar moths it was some time before I detected the fat-bodied caterpillars, so well did they harmonise with their surroundings. They are fully grown and will soon be going into the chrysalis stage. It is strange to think that they will emerge as fully fledged moths next June, if nothing untoward happens in the meanwhile.

The two spikes on the hinder end of their bodies are used as claspers. One I watched feeding devoured the leaf with great rapidity. The purple marks on the face and the curious oval pink patch on the back exactly match the marks on the poplar leaves. These creatures are as thick as my thumb and just about as long. It is quite amazing that such large caterpillars can escape detection, and it only goes to show that Nature is the greatest camouflage expert.

Strange to say, I searched the poplars only a week ago, but noticed nothing. When I touched the branch on which one was busy feeding it seemed to contract to half its length, bunching up into a thick green cylinder. I hailed William Webber, bound for the Drovers' Arms, and showed them to him.

'Well, I never seen the like afore, they'd be uncommon, wouldn't they?' He vouchsafed the opinion that they would do a lot of damage to the cabbages. Had William Webber used his eyes a bit more he must have seen scores of Puss moth caterpillars during his long life. From his astonishment I doubt whether he had found one even as a boy. If he had, he would certainly have remembered it, because once seen, these fearsome beasts (which rear like horses when alarmed or angry) make a great impression, especially on a child's mind.

There is a long dark sleep soon for these strange green monsters and they will not wake until the swifts, wheeling at this moment over the poplar, have left our shores and returned again, next June.

Much can happen in the interval. Life is perilous for everyone these days, we are subjected to the same natural laws, at the mercy of the ebb and flow of circumstance. Perhaps some big black bird will pick me off—who knows?

July 30th. A noble forest. Another unsolved mystery

'G.J.' OF Naseby accompanied me on another butterfly hunting expedition to a forest which was new to me, but of which I had heard good reports.

I found it even more noble than Salcey, with magnificent ridings and venerable oaks and every ride hedged with willow. If Iris is to be found anywhere in the county it is surely here!

The day was cloudy with a high wind; when we first arrived, there was sunshine, though of a fitful character. But this made no difference to the

flies. In the more sheltered ridings they were an intolerable nuisance, all day their plaintive buzzings were in my ears, so much so that after I returned home and went to bed I still heard their fretting wings. The brain, like the eye, retains impressions for a considerable time. I remember, as a boy, after visiting a rookery in spring, hearing the 'Caw, Caw' for hours afterwards. This torturing hum of flies and their constant unwelcome attentions is a plague which is absent in the early part of the summer, yet it is all in accord with the life of these midsummer forest lands.

We entered the place by a narrow riding, fringed with knapweed and profuse meadow sweet. After a night of heavy rain, the grass and underwood were wringing wet. Meadow Browns and Ringlets flopped about, heedless of the absence of sun, but no other butterflies were on the wing. Meadow Browns seemed almost as numerous as the flies; as far as one could see, their dancing shapes could be observed all along the length of the ridings. Only one very worn White Admiral was out and about, and he only appeared when the sun shone for a moment. Very soon we came upon the keeper's cottage, stone-built, the roof tiled with Colley Weston slabs, very much in the manner of a Cotswold house. Built in the centre of many noble rides which radiated from it in every direction, it was like the hub of a giant wheel. From his front door one could command a view of the greater part of the woodland, for the cottage had been built on rising ground. A sleepy retriever was lying outside the back door. The long grass had been mown all round the house and down the centre of the ridings too. It was a beautiful place, heavy with smell of the drying hay. A tap on the door brought the keeper to us, a thick-set man in shirt sleeves and breeches. On enquiry as to whether he had seen Iris it appeared that he had, only last year.

He had tried to capture one in a riding close at hand, which he pointed out to us, but it had eluded him and flown up into the oaks; he had often seen them, 'most years', he said. His old master, a certain noble Duke, was very keen on butterflies, and many times he used to visit the keeper's gibbets in the woods to watch and catch the Emperors. For twenty-seven years this keeper had lived in that Hansel and Gretel dwelling in the heart of the forest.

Sometimes gentlemen came to stay with him for weeks at a time, in the hope of seeing the King of British butterflies.

I congratulated him on having such a lovely home, set in such wonderful surroundings, and I was surprised to find that he appreciated his good fortune. Like the other old hermit in Salcey forest, he had always lived in the woods, surrounded from birth by noble trees. After admiring his dogs we went down one of the main ridings. And though the sun very kindly

shone forth no Iris was to be seen, only myriads of torturing flies which came swarming out of the sallow to form a black halo round our heads.

Perhaps the wind was too strong, or perhaps we were unlucky, but only White Admirals showed up, though not so plentifully as in Salcey.

We found some Puss Moth caterpillars on a sallow bush; I captured a Comma, newly out, and J found what he thought was the chrysalis of a Duke of Burgundy fritillary. He also captured a Pruni in good condition. On some thistles on the fringe of the forest we discovered several empty 'nests' of the Painted Lady caterpillars but they had 'fed up' and gone. J remarked that he had never found the chrysalis of this insect in its wild state. All the butterfly books say that it 'suspends its chrysalis from a pad of silk attached to the food plant or surrounding herbage'. But though I searched carefully round the recently vacated food plant I could see no sign. Now, thought I, this is very strange. If the caterpillar pupates it must suspend its chrysalis somewhere in the vicinity. They certainly *do not* pupate on the food plant. Then where do they go to when they are full fed and ready to change? Here was a little mystery, almost as puzzling as that of the swifts. So I resolved to obtain some caterpillars and find out for myself, if it was possible.

J's larvae in his breeding box at home had certainly pupated, attaching themselves to the side of the box. But butterflies bred under unnatural conditions are forced to adopt new methods. I began to form the theory that, when full fed and ready to pupate, they burrow into the earth, like many of the moths do. 'Nonsense,' said J, 'the caterpillars of the painted lady cannot burrow.'

At last, on another thistle I found, to my great joy, a hibernaculum, or more properly a 'nest', with a caterpillar still inside. He had not yet vacated his dining room, that neat little chamber which the larvae form as soon as they are hatched from the egg. They draw the thistle leaves together and spin a web of silk into a sort of tent. In this they feed. No doubt it is some protection against birds and ichneumon flies.

Now, perhaps I could prove in my own way, beyond all doubt, what *did* happen to the caterpillar and where he went.

For I had in my mind a certain scheme. I would place the thistle, complete with larvae and 'dining room' untouched, in a pot, plant it carefully so that it would still grow, and place the pot in the shallow end of my rockery pool so that the caterpillar, when he set forth on his mysterious travels, would not be able to reach the land. Even if he left the parent plant and reached the side of the pot and crawled down it he would come to the water and be turned back. In other words I would maroon that unhappy thing, like Robinson Crusoe, on a deserted island, surrounded by a miniature sea!

July 31st. The Painted Lady mystery

THIS morning, first thing, I visited my castaway. The evening before I had left him, well provided with food and water, still snug in his nest. I took the pot out of the water, with the thistle planted in it. The nest was empty, the bird had flown!

Aha! thought I, now I will empty the pot carefully and perhaps I shall find him beneath the soil. I did so, turning out the soil on a piece of newspaper. And sure enough, I very soon found a grub-like creature about the size of my caterpillar, but of quite a different colour. Could this be it? could it have changed in the few hours which had elapsed into this dingy grub? or (and here a horrid thought occurred to me), was this grub already in the soil? by some unhappy chance it might have been; circumstantial evidence has hung a man before now.

But I was taking no chances. I put the grub back in some earth and now have it in my study.

But I must confess I was uneasy about this grub. Somehow it did not look as though it could ever have been a caterpillar or could ever be a butterfly. I therefore resolved to visit the field where J had secured some larvae the other day, in a thistly pasture near Naseby. Between heavy thunder-showers Cecily and I went to this field and began to search the thistles. In a short time I had found many vacated nests but not one with the larvae within. After searching half an acre of thistles my patience was at last rewarded. I found two larvae, one fully fed (to my great delight), the other half grown. Both were in their webs, the former having been vacated as the little creature had eaten all the leaves within it. This is the habit of the larvae of the Painted Lady. They construct several such webs during the three weeks in which they are preparing to pupate.

I have placed these two new victims on a thistle, complete with turf beneath, and have protected them by a fine net, so I defy them to give me the slip. If I find two grubs in the earth in a few days time I shall have made a new discovery, that the larvae of the Painted Lady do *not* suspend their chrysalis on the food plant, but burrow in the earth. All that remains is to wait and see—quite an exciting business!



CHAPTER VI

Summer

August 3rd. The Painted Lady mystery

The two caterpillars marooned on their island are showing intense activity. They have both left their webs and are creeping about the thistle. One managed to get out of the imprisoning muslin net, or bag, which I placed over the pot, and was walking on the outside of the flower pot. One false step and he must have fallen into the pond. The other spends all his time exploring the thistle stem and leaves, visiting his old webs, and walking up and down the grass stems.

August 7th. The mystery partly solved

AFTER two days one of the caterpillars has completely vanished, as did the other; the second was also not to be seen anywhere on the thistle or grass, nor was it buried in the earth. I then began to search the pond and found its apparently drowned and lifeless body floating in the water. I fished it out and laid it on a stone in the sun. How long it had been in the water I do not know. After a minute or two I thought I detected a movement, so I gently stroked its back. This seemed to liven it up and in about ten minutes it was making feeble attempts to walk. Half an hour later it was its old self and continuing its rapid peregrinations. I removed the pot from the water, re-adjusted the muslin, and brought the whole contraption indoors. This morning it is preparing to pupate. It has left the thistle and has drawn several grass tips together in a sort of tent, under this it is suspending itself.

I have proved this much, that the larvae leave the food plant and wander away, as do many other caterpillars (probably in their natural state they go right away, perhaps the distance of a good sized field), and

when they have found a suitable place, a grass stem or other plant, they suspend themselves in the ordinary way. They do not however pupate in the close vicinity of the food plant and certainly not on the food plant itself, as the text books say they do. 'Woolly bear' caterpillars, which one sees crossing the road in late summer, travel a good distance before their final stage. Apparently there must be some cause for this restlessness. Is it the migratory instinct, or is intense activity necessary before they pupate?

Brimstones and Small Tortoiseshells have the same habit, sometimes travelling as much as three or four hundred yards from their original food plant. So ends this little experiment.

I have found a hedgehog down Sperrywell Lane yesterday and brought it home in my handkerchief. It refused to unfold so I put it in the shallow end of my rockery pool. After a second's pause it unrolled with a sneeze and a jerk, and, to my astonishment, swam with ease to the far side of the pond, where I helped it out. He did not stay upon the order of his going but ran off at a round pace under the laurels. I like these quaint land urchins, they are lovable little people, though they carry a gruesome collection of various ticks and fleas.

After midday I walked up the road to see whether the Major had cut his wheat behind the manor farm, as I have noticed the grey wood pigeons scouting the land for stooked crops. I shall 'have my satisfaction' of these gentry at a later date, but in the meanwhile I may shoot a few off the crops. I stood by a big ash tree on the verge of the field, which was (as I had surmised) cut and stooked up. This tree is a landmark for flighting pigeon, even in winter time, as they cross from the arable fields on the other side of the valley for their roosting quarters in the park. But though I saw a few birds, they were not coming to the field in any numbers.

There is a deeper tawny gold dying the uncut wheat, soon all the fields will be cut and carried. It has been a grand harvest.

August 8th. Duck shooting. W. H. Hudson's masterpiece

I WENT with the Vicar this evening to shoot ducks by the big lake. We did not arrive there until 9.15 p.m.; a close, brooding evening, without a puff of breeze. Multitudes of swallows were hawking about the willow thickets at the head of the lake, all were twittering ceaselessly, sweeping about in great harmonious companies. Midges danced over the nearly ripe barley near by. As the sun sank it turned a deep crimson, or rather a rich fulvous rose, and was magnified by the faint evening mist.

I stood behind a little thorn bush smoking my pipe and pulled the ears of my retriever who sat by my side. She seemed to be enjoying the peace-

ful scene as much as I was, no doubt she was glad that shooting days are here again. There is little for a sporting dog to do during the 'dog days' and they become lazy and bored without work. Every now and again she lifted her face enquiringly and studied my face, every time I raised my hand to brush away a midge she turned round and looked at me. She knew what was 'toward' and was watching my hands and my every action.

I could hear mallard quacking among the willows but I only saw two birds rise and circle the bushes once, dropping again into the calm water. Far away a cow began to bellow, a remarkably musical bellow like the note of a bassoon. Then a heron 'cranked' once and I saw two of the big birds flying across the lake, gliding, one behind the other on set wings, their reflections beneath them.

Not a ripple disturbed the lake save when a pike jumped or a waterhen swam about. The swallows continued to hawk overhead, keeping up their continued twitter. Suddenly the whole flock banded together and flew away up the valley. They are feeling the 'wander pain' already. Behind me sitting on an ash root I saw the genial Padre, looking uncannily like Prime Minister Churchill. He was, like me, puffing at his pipe. It was a peaceful scene.

Not far away three magnificent black poplars were outlined against the soft pink sky, a faint whisper coming from their leaves.

The leaves of the black poplar are like the sails of a big ship, they will catch the slightest breeze when other trees ignore it.

There was a smell of river water and damp marsh vegetation. Then two duck appeared, dead low and to my right. They passed over the barley and crossed the lane. Then came a bunch of five. They too passed wide of me but offered a shot to the Padre. I saw him swing and fire but no birds fell. The shock of the report in the quiet evening set every duck on wing. Then for a long time nothing came.

'Burrr'—a curious whirr made me turn just in time to see a swift, which had skimmed my thorn bush. The speed these birds attain must be prodigious. Then three more duck came in, passing high over the black poplars and out of range.

The other night, four guns, standing in the lane, shot twenty duck close to those trees. Later the duck will get wary of the lane and the trees and give it a wide berth. Most of the birds now coming in are young of the year.

I have just re-read Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago*, surely his greatest book. At least it is my favourite, and I have read it scores of times. Some of his books 'tail off' towards the end. *Idle Days in Patagonia* is one of these, it begins well but soon becomes dull and prosaic. *Far Away and Long Ago* flows fresh and vigorous from the first chapter to the last. Like a stream it

has solemn reaches and musical shallows. His first realization of the fact of Death is vividly told. To many of us the knowledge comes gradually and painlessly, but to me, as it was with Hudson, the realization came with a great shock.

It happened that I had to undergo a trivial but unpleasant operation for the removal of my tonsils. One morning I was told I must not get up but must lie in bed for a while. I was instantly intensely puzzled and alarmed. What could it mean?

Then the news was broken to me; I was going to have a 'little operation!' I suppose I was a dreadful coward, but there came to me an almost unbearable desire to run away; I felt like a trapped animal. The ghoulis preparations began, doors opened and shut, the sounds of wheels, scrunching on the gravel drive below the windows, struck like a dagger into the pit of my stomach. Looking back I see what a pitiful little coward I was!

I was carried into another room, clad only in a nightshirt, and laid flat upon a clean-scrubbed table, as though I were a pig for salting. From where I lay I could look out of the window to the green fields which I knew and loved so intimately; how I wished I could escape from the hands of these people and dart like a scared bird out of the window and away over that green valley! Only once or twice in my life have I had this unbearable desire to escape.

A mask was put over my face (it was before the days of the subtle administration of anaesthetics) and then began the slow, or apparently slow, process of stunning me with ether.

I think that to feel one's senses being slowly stifled and one's thoughts disturbed and distorted is worse than any physical pain. I felt a numbing wave creep upward from my toes, higher and higher like a rising tide. It reached my knees, my waist.

Then I seemed to become a spark, one single spark which shone amidst a vast darkness, a spark which at times flickered and almost snuffed out. I knew that if it did I should never wake again. Of course these sensations, on which I have perhaps dwelt too long, were only the distortions of my drugged brain, but they were, nevertheless, very horrible.

When I recovered and was eventually allowed out again, this nightmare of extinction occupied my every wakeful moment. Somehow I had never previously given much thought to the fact of death and had no fear of it, but now I was completely changed and could think of nothing else. This was, without doubt, a kind of melancholia caused by the shock of the operation. I might say here that this was not the first operation I had had. Some years before I had undergone a much more serious one.

The sunlight, the fields and woods, the birds and wild things, were all presented to me in quite a new light. In a day I had grown up, and all my

understanding had to readjust itself. It never occurred to me that death itself is so natural, as natural as birth, or marriage, or the birds and the green grass. It was appalling because it seemed to me to be *unnatural*; the fact, which I knew to be uncomfortably true, that I must one day cease to be, was a perfectly shocking fact. I was of course thinking of death as an everlasting sleep, of a sort of state in which one was *aware* that one was sleeping for ever, and ever, and ever, in other words, a living death. I did not know then that such a thing is impossible. If death were really that, then it would indeed be something to fear and it would make this life absolutely intolerable.

Nor could I then visualize another life, the life of the Spirit apart from the body.

I learned that protoplasm was a complex chemical compound, for instance, and that without that combination of chemical compounds living matter could not exist. So I reasoned that in the same way the Spirit, or soul, could not exist apart from the body, if it was to experience any sort of life as we know it. And I found my life so wonderful that I had no wish to change it for any other. The latter sentiment I still hold.

Very gradually, as I got strong and well again, as I quickly did, this vast looming fear which blotted out the sunlight like the cloaked dark wings of some terrible vulture, became less and less, only to recur at rare intervals, usually at night when I lay awake in my bed. Some people, I know, go through life with this horrible shadow ever with them, they never outgrow that childish fear which, as in my case, was born out of a sudden realization of the fact of death. They still think of death as an unawaking sleep of which they will be dimly conscious, a sort of living entombment. But there should be no fear of any natural process, it is the unnatural processes which should give cause for fear; deformity, sexual twists, and so forth.

And even supposing we could 'live for ever' we know that one day this earth will be as dead as the moon and could not support life of any sort. Once born, we cannot escape extinction so far as our bodies are concerned. But of my conception of the Spirit I will write at another time. I do not mean these notes to be a treatise on philosophy nor yet an autobiography, so I will leave that rather sad time when, as a white-faced small boy, I roamed the fields about my home, so deep in thought.

I write of these things because they are part of nature. These are commonplace thoughts which must occur to every normal person from time to time and which influence our lives, therefore they are important.

There is so much joy and beauty in life that I am sometimes wildly happy; such things as good friends, good books and pictures, lovely music, and above all, Nature, these make living so worth while. We can-

not all be happy, nor can we be happy all the time. Most of us have had (at some time or another) very deep and wounding disappointments, but the best thing is to forget them and seek, yes, most diligently, for the simple pleasures which this life has to offer.

For many, the Bible is like a staff in the hand, it must have brought untold comfort to countless millions and helped them along many a weary mile. So it is with Shakespeare and all great works of art. Others find peace in Nature, as I do. And sometimes I think of that shadowy army of unformed humans who wait to take our place, who are now within ourselves and part of us. This gives the true perspective to the facts of life and death. I have said enough. I started these notes with an account of duck shooting and am now babbling inately about very different things. I blame Hudson for it. If I had not taken up his book earlier this evening I should not now be writing, long after every sane person is asleep.

August 10th. The mystic dance

I AGAIN waited for duck tonight by the big lake. The evening was even more serene and calm than yesterday, without a breath of wind, and overhead, very remote and delicate, cirrus wisps were combed out in long graceful hairlike lines.

As soon as I got down behind my thorn bush the swallows attracted my attention, and I became so enthralled with watching them I quite forgot about the duck. About thirty yards from where I sat, between the hawthorn and the barley, there was a wooden fence, and beyond that, a nice strip of broken ground, huge tussocks of sun-baked grass, willows, interspersed with alders, a jumble of sedge, reed-mace and willow-herb. The thick band of willows partially screened the gleaming stillness of the lake. As soon as the last glim of the red sun had gone, swallows appeared from all quarters of the compass, first hawking and twittering, as they did last night, in little parties of thirty or more birds, and then banding together in one vast melodious multitude.

They came drifting over the barley, turning back, now this way, now that, now up the valley, now over the lake towards the rosy sunset's glow. As it became darker, so their hissing chatter seemed to increase in volume. They ascended higher and higher until I could barely see them, and then began a wonderful aerial waltz. It was as though they were dancing to an inaudible orchestra and their ball-room was the sky.

Round and round in ever widening circles, their voices very far away, faster and faster, whirling, whirling, until they seemed like specks of dust caught up by a vortex of wind which span them with ever increasing violence. Possibly a thousand or more birds composed that feathered company. And then an awe-inspiring thing happened. The twittering

ceased suddenly, cut off as it were at a given signal, and the birds began dropping like tiny black pebbles into the willow bushes. In twos and threes they hurtled earthwards, those remaining still circled (though silently now), until only a very small remnant was left in the sky. At last they too followed until every bird had descended and the sky was clear. It had taken quite ten minutes for this performance of 'dropping down' to be accomplished and then came the final act. In a minute or two my ear was arrested by a swelling sound most difficult to describe. I can only liken it to millions of glass fragments being jingled together like fairy castanets, or of silver harrows drawn over uneven ground.

It was, I think, the most ravishing, unearthly sound I have ever heard.

Had those swallows indulged in a farewell dance to the sun? or was it a ceremonial dance, celebrating their coming passage overseas? And now, down among the dark willows, which somehow matched these dainty little people, with their slender wings and perfect feet, were they discussing the coming great adventure?

The hissing, rustling, tinkling, music continued as the landscape became more blurred by night's approach and then gradually, as gradually as the sun had glided down below the hills, this faery music faded into silence. Each feathered mite was now asleep, head under wing, each graceful willow branch was laden with rank upon rank of slumbering birds, the slender leaves matching the slender sleepers. A rare loveliness was there which could be almost likened, incongruously enough, to a perfume. And over all the quiet stars glowed and not a ripple disturbed the shining expanse of the slumbering lake.

August 11th. Ironstone workings. The old coach road. Brock Hall

I FOLLOWED the track away from the Foxhall road this afternoon, turning left-handed between the gateless brick wall, which long ago was part of an ironstone railway bridge.

Not far away, some sections of the old line still remain, the rusty metals choked with weeds. Winding about in the deep cuttings it is a curiously romantic little railway, which impressed me very strongly as a child. Sometimes if I was lucky (the workings were in use in those days) I would hear the 'Chuff Chuffing' engine in the distance and, as I hung expectantly over the bridge, it would come swaying round the bend, a toylike engine, all glorious in green paint and with a big brass dome which winked valiantly in the sunlight. This dome reminded me of a rhubarb cover, it dwarfed the engine and driver, and filled my soul with delight.

Standing upright in the so-called 'cab' was the driver (most fortunate of mortals), and the string of jolting wooden trucks, iron-bound and yellow-stained, swayed and clattered like a mad snake behind the engine,

brushing over the nettles and wild snap-dragons (those brilliant yellow flowers of the toadflax) and setting the tall spires of the willow-herb nodding in the passing gust.

This engine toiled each day for many years up and down that track until one day, so the story goes, it blew up and killed the driver.

It is many years since wheels came rumbling round the bend and now the weeds are triumphant, only in places may one glimpse the red metals. In the hot August sun the Small Coppers play, chasing each other over the hot slopes, and along the banks of the cutting, splendid Peacock butterflies toy with the purple thistle tops. Red Admirals and Tortoiseshells open and shut their wings to the hot glare of the sun. And how hot the sun can be, down in the weedy cutting! There is little shade but for the willow-herb, there are no bushes or trees, save an occasional clump of sallow, and consequently there are few birds. Yet, even there, certain species are found; Yellow-hammers and Corn-buntings, an occasional Lark and Tree Pipit, and, very infrequently, a Wheatear, on passage.

Somehow, too, there is a curious 'snaky' feel about the place. It is just the locality they like, unfrequented, excessively hot, with all manner of chinks and crannies and tall rank weeds.

The navvies found some rare pottery when the cutting was made, one vase was full of Roman coins.

But today I did not follow the cutting (somehow I have been led away to talk of it), I kept to the rough track which leads westwards from the road. Once upon a time this track had a good metalled surface but now only three rammed-white strips remain. The rest is turf. Nettles, thistles, and hemlock, grow on either hand, and dense thickets of sloe (I noticed the round green marbles of the fruit already forming). Multitudes of Skippers and Coppers were buzzing and flitting among the thistles, both insects love the sun-baked earth.

In a little while the track divided in a Y. The left hand arm wound away through the cornfields to a farm where, as boys, we used to fish for carp, in a very thick and malodorous duck pond, much frequented by pigs. These animals would frequently disturb our piscatorial contemplations, wallowing and grunting, and sending every fish deep into the mud.

The right hand lane I had never explored. It went away northwards, a grand, wild-looking track, obviously an old coach road. Tall straggling hedges of thorn towered on either hand, hedges that had not known a billhook for many a year. The sloe bushes and blackthorn formed a solid wall on both sides of the lane, sometimes they almost blocked the way, their branches meeting across the path. Rest-harrow grew in profusion, melilot showed in the hedge, handsome cow-parsley towered up, angelica too, both bold and virile plants, seemingly as strong and lusty as trees, their

flat-flowered heads alive with wonderful unknown beetles. A Painted Lady passed me here, as I stood at the junction of the track.

I turned northwards, along the unexplored lane, the hot sun on my back. Grasshoppers skipped and whizzed before my advancing shadow. Through the gaps in the hedges on both sides I could see corn fields. The ears were nearly ripe, the soft breeze made a faint clatter among their dried and heavy heads.

Then I came to banks of rest-harrow. I always think that the name 'rest-harrow' is peculiarly beautiful. In some ways it suggests the life of the fields, the lonely fields where partridges 'jug' at close of day and where hares lollop; it calls to mind the goldfinch flocks, busy about the thistle clumps. It also suggests windswept uplands, sheep-walks, bestarred with crowfoot, forgotten headlands and sequestered coombes, the glare of August suns, and all the pageant of the mellowing year. In the same way, traveller's joy conjures up visions and memories of dusty waysides, village ale houses, Kentish kilns, and the romance of the open road.

The rest-harrow grew on either side of the path, knapweeds with it, on which sat two newly hatched brimstone butterflies, a male and female. What a beautiful insect this is, to be sure! Were it a rarity how we should rave over it!

A young jay burst from the sloe bushes on my right, and flew away over the hedge. The lane bore right, then crooked left, and the sun was shut away, before me the old green road was in shade.

Here among the cool grass were the delicate umbells of fools parsley, exquisitely beautiful and delicate, reminding me of the finest Brussels lace.

No rabbits hopped across the turf, or sat bolt upright on the thicker's edge, the only sign of life was a carrion crow which bustled out of the top of an oak, throwing a hoarse oath at me over his shoulder. This oak (I stood awhile to admire it) was a grand old tree. The lower foliage was in shade, but, higher up, the westering sun shone upon the mounds of thick leaf, which completely hid the trunk and lower branches. As is the habit of the oak in late summer, fresh leaves were sprouting from the tips of the old. They were of a sickly green colour, a 'false spring' green. Some were of a fulvous ochre hue.

Behind was the hard blue sky, like the drop curtain of a theatre. Millions of flies were buzzing about the sunlit leaves, chasing each other, settling, stirring this way and that; some were of a wonderful iridescent blue colour, as though they were clad in mail. With them a small hair-streak was flying around.

A swallow passed over from cornfield to cornfield, chuckling liquidly, so happy! so free! In an instant it was gone, but not before I had glimpsed the brick-red throat.

For at least a mile I followed this old road, seeing no bird or beast, coming now and then to a patch of sunlight where the rays penetrated the tall thorny barricades. And then the track widened into a green clearing and before me I saw a thick wood and a broken gate. This was surely the queerest place, the most forsaken wood in England!

The sun blazed here with full power, the skippers buzzed, grasshoppers jumped, prodigiously, from grass-blade to grass-blade. I went up to the gate and looked over. A dazzling sight met my eyes. Willow herb (or, prettier name still, rose bay) was everywhere, masses and masses of it, and the sun illuminated each tall flower-clad spire. The fragrant scent was all around me. Whin bushes grew amongst it, and very dense thorn scrub, and, most curious of all, three fine silver cedar trees, incongruous in this wilderness of wild flowers! The eye, taking all this in, looked on beyond, irresistibly attracted to the rose bay spires, and there in the distance was the wild wood, and a jumble of very high feather-headed grass, more whin bushes, sallow, and ash. I dropped over the gate and pushed my way through the willow herb and whins.

It was surprising to find the grass, the tall graceful grass, so yellow and dead. And the whins were black with dried pods which rattled huskily as I pushed through them. Blackberry blossom was full out, and countless butterflies and a great many very small white moths were feasting on it.

In a clearing was a thorn tree. It was some thirty feet in height and arrested my attention because of its obvious age. It had no main trunk, but seven smaller ones, which had twined and wound themselves around each other in the most amazing manner. I could almost imagine a massive grey wild elephant, or possibly a party of them, standing under its scant shade, flapping their huge fan-like ears, and their bellies rumbling. And had I glimpsed the striped form of a tiger among the tall bleached grass I should not have thought it exotic.

In these out-of-the-way places many wild animals, even dangerous wild animals, might live in comparative security. There is that unbelievable story about the mysterious creature which for some years was supposed to live in the Pythley covers of Scotland Wood and Longholt. I was reminded of that day when hounds seemed to be running with surprising sureness and purpose, not to say excessive speed, and, before the eyes of the startled Hunt, a strange animal, the like of which had never been seen before, was glimpsed momentarily as it crossed a ride.

Some said it was wart-hog, for it was of that shape and size, or a wild boar, others, that it was some species of deer. But its identity was not disclosed and it was never caught, though hounds chased it many times. Possibly it had escaped from a zoo. After a while it was seen no more.

As I went slowly forward into the heart of this enchanting place, my

eyes almost dazzled by the sunlit rose bay, I came to a low mound choked with brambles, a mound of yellow earth

At its base was a badger's sett, a yawning cavern which had been dug by the powerful claws, right down under the wooded bank. The excavated earth would have filled several farm carts. It had been scratched out into the grass for a distance of ten feet or more, a long, low rampart of yellow earth.

The badger's runway could be clearly seen leading out of the sett, and on bending down I could see his massive spoor. As I stood looking at this veritable fortress I could not help admiring the badger. Against all the advances of machinery he has held his own with a tenacity and sagacity which surpasses any other British wild animal. No one has bothered about him much, for the very good reason he has kept himself to himself. He shuns man and all things to do with man. The fox would have gone under long ago but for the fact the Hunts preserve him. Though the fox is afraid of man he will raid the hen houses and poultry yards when he is short of meat. This the badger very rarely does.

What better place (thought I) could this animal have chosen than this forsaken wood!

I *do* hate the way most Hunts and all keepers will kill the badger. It is such a harmless lovable beast. Very occasionally they will force their way into a fowl house and kill a few chickens, but what are a few miserable brainless chickens compared to this fine silky haired wild bear? I admire him enormously.

Very few people have ever seen a badger. Infinite patience is required if you would get even a glimpse of him. Down below me now, as I stood in that little clearing, he would be tucked up in his inner fortress, fully aware, no doubt, that his hated enemy was above. He would have heard me pushing through the whins, he would have felt the earth vibrate. There in the gloom he would move his black and white head, those short amusing ears would be cocked, those piggy eyes blink towards the entrance.

Tonight, when I have gone, he will emerge, and go jogging away under the brambles down that well-beaten path, though not before he had taken a very cautious and snuffling survey of his immediate vicinity. Only when the pale ghost of dawn begins to flood the woodlands will he return from his hunting. May he live on, and his children's children after him, in that quiet stronghold among the forest of rose bay.

August 14th. Army-minded dogs

I HAVE come across an interesting sidelight on the mentality of dogs. In this village a Regiment of Foot is billeted and for a mascot they have a fine Alsatian dog. He is always out with the troops, marching with the men, or

sitting on his haunches at the entrance to their billets, disdainfully surveying curs of low degree. And from a Tommy I heard his story.

It happened that one day last summer the soldiers, then without a mascot, were marching through a village when this dog attached itself to them, walking beside them for many a weary mile until they reached their camping place for the night.

No amount of threats would drive him away, they said, but I cannot believe that those threats would be very insistent. So he has been with them ever since. Why do dogs attach themselves to soldiers?

I know of two other cases. In every instance the animals will have nothing to do with anyone not in uniform. They enjoy the free and roving life, campaigning seems to be in their blood. Is there something about the tramp, tramp of feet which attracts them, or is it something handed down to them from their forebears? Dogs have always been camp followers and it is my belief that it is indeed an awakened instinct which prompts them to 'enlist'. Perhaps that instinct tells them that where the Army moves there also is food in abundance. The dogs which behave in this way are almost always very 'masculine' dogs, terriers, Alsations, and the like.

August 16th. Pulling beans. The work of the farm labourer. Beauty of trees

A FEW fields have been cut but in many places the corn is badly laid by the wind and rain. There has been rain practically every day, with lowering skies. The only good thing I can say about such weather is that my newly planted trees should take hold; the birch, larch, and yew, will have a chance to get a start before the winter. It is well to remember that it is not until the second year that one can say whether a tree has survived or not. A few birches which I planted a year last autumn bore leaves, but this spring they showed signs of dying.

I have been helping the Major with his bean field. In the ordinary way, these beans would have been cut by a machine, but owing to the wet weather such a wilderness of tall rank weeds has sprung up between the rows that the knife would not take them and each plant has to be pulled by hand. It is not a large field. I estimated that it took me exactly half-an-hour to work down one row. The beans came out of the ground very easily, all were black and ripe. This business of bean-pulling is back-aching work, but I found a certain pleasure in walking knee-high through so many different kinds of wild plants. Here and there I came upon a scarlet poppy, but the bulk of the weeds were thistles in full flower and the whole field was alive with butterflies. Moon daisies, speedwells, clover and thistles were all mingled in one intricate wilderness, sometimes it was hard to find the actual bean plant. After a while the monotony of the work became

mechanical, the eye wearied of so much vegetation. No wonder few great nature writers have been found among the ranks of working farmers! There is no time for idling and study, the work becomes as mechanical as totting up figures. There is no time to watch the passing bird or cloud, no time to let the eye rove over the trees and hedgerows. Slowly the far end of the row creeps nearer and then back again I go, up the field, through the same jungle of weeds, each bean plant alike. Think of all the energy which man has put into the soil since he began to farm the land! The artist may paint a great picture which will long survive him, a writer may write a wonderful book which will give countless thousands much pleasure long after the author is dead. But the work of the farm labourer, the never ending ceaseless work, has nothing to show after a little while, it is a continuous war; like woman's work, it is never done.

All the same, a farmer's life is a good one. It must be a joy to watch the crops maturing, the sight of growing things gives much pleasure. To see line after line of green points springing from the dusty soil and finally the golden harvest carried safely away to the barn, these must be pleasurable things.

One often sees a farmer leaning over his gate watching the wind rippling over his crops. There is an ocean of his own contriving, a reward for many hours of labour. Just as I like to watch the yearly harvest of wild flowers and plants grow and mature, so must the farmer take delight in his growing and maturing crops.

The wild crops are not gathered, the weeds men scorn and hate, they flourish and rise up, choking the hedges and then, as the tide drops, they wither and die and the first frosts of winter lay them low. So do the trees grow, sturdily and strong. All the summer the trees are growing, we do not notice the death of trees, it is too gradual a process.

Richard Jefferies remarks on the delight of watching plants and trees growing, it is part of summer's joy. Just as the farmer watches his crops maturing so I would like to see a great wood of my own planting rising higher and higher each year, its deep green shade becoming thicker and thicker, the birds and beasts flocking to it and finding delight in it. My enjoyment would be doubly great because I should know my crop was a lasting one, that long after I had gone it would still be giving pleasure to men. I would not plant a wood 'factory' for the purpose of cutting it down to make money out of it. Such places are not so beautiful as the woods planted for beauty's sake.

Yesterday I had news that on the estate in my native village all the trees are to be cut down to pay for death duties. And what lovely trees they are to be sure, magnificent beeches, mighty 'jackdawy' oaks, fine rugged elms. All to be felled to make money! Soon there will be nothing left but scarred stumps and bareness.

It is awful to think of this curse, this lust for money. I talked to a farmer once about another great estate which was to be denuded of trees. 'Why not?' said he, 'they will fetch a good *price*, they aren't doing any good where they are!'

Not doing any good! fetch a good price! just as though such things as trees can be assessed in terms of money!

Who plants for beauty now, like the landowners of a past generation? The Georgian age had many drawbacks, I think the squirearchy were an affected, simpering lot, in their lace ruffles, with their betting and card playing, with their 'E'Gad! Sirs' and their drunken orgies, but they did have an eye for beauty and planted many very fine woods which still delight the eye.

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I must confess I am no lover of August as a month. The vitality of summer has spent itself, no longer do we see the verdant lush grass and the promise and blossoms of plants and flowers. Though the meadows are green with the aftermath it is a false green, like a pathetic attempt to recapture youth.

It is astonishing to find the streams, which normally at this season of the year are bone-dry ditches, running as strongly as though it were March. The gateways are quagmires of mud, the bye-lanes slimy underfoot. And the recent putting back of the clock to old summer time has brought the winter a sudden step nearer. My belief is that this winter will be a grim one, with much suffering in the towns through bombing, and the food shortage will be more pronounced.¹ A few swallows remain about the reservoir but the large flocks have gone. I saw no more vast congregations such as I witnessed a few weeks back.

This evening, Cecily and I walked round the shoot. For a space the dark clouds had blown away and the sun, somewhat anaemic, burst forth out of a pale Prussian blue sky, glistening on the rainy fields.

Legions of plover were encamped on Jones' plough, fully eight hundred birds. We saw no rabbits anywhere and few pigeons, only two flapper moorhens which ran under a culvert. We walked across the fields below Naseby Hall to have a look at the pool. It was a peaceful scene, the still, dark, water, starred with lilies, the graceful willows, their tops in full sunlight, and the green slope of the oak-studded park leading up to the house. King George VI stayed here once for the hunting and he must have walked many times beside this lake and enjoyed its peace and quietness. A rustic was fishing under the willows, sitting on an upturned boat. As we came up, his float dived under and he drew forth a fine fat roach. There were pike, so he said, under the lily beds, 'big 'uns' too. And it looked a

¹ This prophecy mercifully proved false.

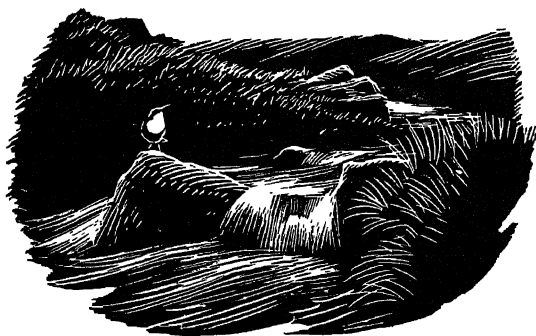
'piky' sort of place, in all truth, with the overhanging trees, the graceful reed beds and the flat rafts of the lily leaves. It was a very English scene, this patient son of the soil watching his float in the dark amber water, the sunlight gilding the willows, and up behind the trees, the western façade of the fine house glowing orange in the low light. I suppose the old families will never return to these lovely homes set amidst green parklands. All that has gone for ever. The age for enjoyment of a peaceful country life is past. The big landowners, even if they could afford to live in these big houses, would more often than not be away on the Continent, or attending race meetings, returning may-be for a week or two in the shooting season.

This lack of love for the country is shocking to me. Again and again I see an utter lack of appreciation for the very thing I find such delight in. Instead of spending their money in beautifying their homes and estates they spend it on artificial transitory things.

Coming home across the water-meadows we put up a green sandpiper from the brook. Every summer's end they come to these streams and fields, as regularly as the swallow to the barn in spring. Like the gipsies they have their round of calls, not only of field and pond but of country too. Africa, Spain, the whole world is theirs. From some African swamp they come to this little horse pond in the meadows, or to the tinkling brook by the woodside. Every year, every late summer they come, romantic wanderers indeed!

Their whole year is mapped out, each season has its own place of residence. Yet to see a bird fly, one would think it lacks purpose. Watch a pigeon leave an ash tree. It circles away, then flies direct as though to perch in another ash, changes its mind and alters course. Birds never seem to have set plans, they live in the present.

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CHAPTER VII

Summer

August 20th. Painted Lady's 'coming out'. Recipe for cooking coarse fish

AT ten minutes to nine this morning I was watching the Painted Lady chrysalis suspended under its grass tent when I saw it begin to swing violently. At three minutes past nine it began to swell in and out, as though it was breathing, and two splits appeared on either side of the hump. Then it broke into two halves and the butterfly crawled forth, a mere grub-like creature with its wings cupped and folded about it. In another one and a half minutes it was clear of its case and crawling up a grass stem. Those wings, more cunningly folded than an airman's parachute, rapidly began to expand. At twenty minutes past nine the wings were their normal size. The measurement of the empty chrysalis was four fifths of an inch long. The length of the butterfly's body was nine-tenths of an inch and its total length, from the tip of the forewing to the head, was one and a half inches. So that in a comparatively short time this butterfly had apparently grown enormously. It was unbelievable that so large a butterfly could have been compressed into so small a space. I had meant this specimen for my collection, but after witnessing this miracle of birth I could not bring myself to put it into the killing bottle.

Comparing it to the one faded specimen I have in my cabinet one would not believe it was the same butterfly. The tips of the wings are a deep blue-black and the background tint a rich fulvous pink. But perhaps the colouring on the outer side of the wings is the most exquisite, for they are patterned by greenish eyes and whorls, like some rich marble. Somehow one feels there is a standard of beauty in Nature which reaches its highest pitch in the plumage of birds and butterflies.

I took the butterfly out into the sun and placed it on a Buddleia bloom in the garden. It sat there for some time, opening and shutting its wings, and at eleven fifteen it flew away. May it have a happy sunny life! Three hours ago it was in the dark cramped prison of the chrysalis, now it has broad fields over which to roam. The story of this insect is romantic. Remember, its parents came over in the spring from Africa or the Riviera, having mated in its native country. The eggs were laid one day at the end of June. I found the caterpillar in its tent on July 31st. It hatched and flew today, August 20th, and may even have a child of its own before the end of the summer. Neither will ever see their true native land. So that this insect, one of millions, was destined to have a most interesting history (from my point of view). The caterpillar was nearly drowned and only prompt action on my part saved it from certain death.

I would have liked to see the mating of its parents far away in sunny Africa, I would have liked to trace the passage of the female across the wide oceans, all the way to that thistle on Naseby battlefield! One little thread in the vast pattern of Life's coloured carpet. The laws which must govern 'chance' are strange, yet these same laws influence our own lives at every twist and turn.

The shuttle moves, perpetually weaving our lives into the pattern of the whole.

Tom Starkey came fishing last night and between us we made quite a basket of small perch. He is an expert chef and when he got home he cooked them. I have never tasted anything so delicious.

Here is the simple recipe, which is the best possible for cooking coarse fish.

Take a 'hazel nut' of butter, melt it in frying pan, put in two chopped onions and three chopped tomatoes, peppercorns and chillies, pepper and salt. Add three tablespoons of olive oil and bring to a nice brown colour over a slow fire.

Wash the fish and clean them (but do not wash again when cleaned), flour each fish separately and put in pan with the mixture, add a tumbler of cider and fry gently over a slow fire, with a cover over the pan.

The result is absolutely astounding!

August 21st. The changing countryside

CECILY and I paid a visit to the old rectory. Truth to say we were very short of meat and there is no game here. I managed to shoot a duck on the pools, which Sparkie the spaniel retrieved. It was a hard swim for her, as there is no clear water now, and thick weeds cover the whole surface; but she managed to reach the duck and bring it safely ashore, though she was in a very exhausted state.

Then I went down the paddock and stood under the little may tree next to 'Peter Pan'.

'Peter Pan' was the name we gave to a great oak tree in which, as boys we had built a house, high up among the branches. Nothing remains of it now, save a few rotting timbers. About thirty feet from the ground the trunk divides into two arms, and it was here we made our wooden house which, when completed, held quite twenty people.

We had a table up there and seats round the side; it was the wonder of the countryside.

Pigeon love the oak tree for it is a half-way house between the cornfields and the park and they often drop in there for a rest.

I stood under the may tree because it is within gunshot of the oak. From this ambush I have had many a rabbit and pigeon. There was a warren beneath the oak and in the old days I used to ambush up in 'Peter Pan'. The rabbits, when they emerged below, were difficult shots, even though they were within only a few yards of me; it is difficult to shoot when the target is directly beneath, and a bulge of bark partially screened them.

It was a still, cloudy evening. The rain, which had fallen throughout the day, had ceased. Three children were playing cricket in a field below the village; I could hear their excited shrillings and the tap of ball on bat.

Beyond the oak was another may tree in which, many years ago, I found the nest of a hawfinch, a very rare bird in this part of the world. I found the nest quite by accident.

One afternoon, during hay time, I was playing beneath the thorn tree and happened to glance up into its intricate fan vaulting and saw an untidy nest of rootlets built at the end of a horizontal bough. I climbed up at once and on feeling in the cup my fingers encountered a single egg. I took it out and gloated over it. Hawfinchs' eggs are handsomely marked with scrawls and blobs, some of the marks are like Arabic writing. Though it is now over thirty years ago I can still recall the ensuing struggle I had with myself. Should I leave the egg and wait until the bird had laid a full clutch, or should I take this single treasure for my collection? Never had I seen such a fascinating egg, it lay in the cup of my palm like some precious jewel. But I was not a nest robber. I knew the Hawfinch was a very local bird. For fully ten minutes I was torn between the almost unbearable desire to pocket it and climb down the tree and the desire to leave it reposing in the shallow cup of rootlets.

At last, with a self-righteous glow, I replaced the egg and descended, eggless, to the ground. God would take care of it, I piously reflected, He would have seen my act of self-denial and would reward me!

Two days later I visited the nest again. I trembled as I climbed the tree.

The nest came nearer to me as I swung myself up from branch to branch, and at last with quivering fingers I felt inside. I almost swooned. The egg was gone! Something had had it, some other small boy perhaps, or a stoat or a cuckoo. I could not believe my senses! I felt in the nest again and then squirmed along the spiny branch and looked directly into it. Not a trace! Weeping I descended the tree; I felt as though I had been played a scurvy trick.

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Beyond the may tree the meadow sloped up into a steep round knoll which marked the duck pond, a square green pond flanked by willows and elms, all ivy clad, in which the wood pigeons built their nests. From behind that green knoll I have sniped many an unsuspecting moorhen as it jerked about among the green weed. At the far end of the pond was another warren and I there have shot many a rabbit too, as it sat outside its burrow, sunning itself. The knoll was a deadly ambush.

From behind the green mound I saw the trickle of water from the pond winding down towards me, to lose itself in the long bright green grass which grew in the 'quaggy' ground about the foot of the oak. Usually at this time of year the pond is low and the stream dried up, but now, with the wet summer, it was full.

I think I knew every blade of grass in this meadow. On that green knoll the first celandines came into flower and lower down, in the moist green bog, the first cuckoo-flowers bloom. Looking up into the hawthorn above my head I saw the frail platform of a dove's nest. The green trunk close to my cheek was twisted and had a hollow about five feet from the ground. I once found a dead stoat in this hollow, years ago. No doubt it had crawled inside to die.

Standing there, I listened intently to all the quiet sounds of a summer's evening. A pigeon was cooing up in the willows, swallows kept passing and repassing over the meadow grass close beside me, and I saw five young ones perched on a telegraph wire at the far end of the paddock. I noticed that each young one was fed in turn, the parent birds hovering delicately in front of them as they proffered them flies.

Soon a pigeon wheeled past. It did not see me until I stepped out from the shadow of the hawthorn and at my shot it fell out in the field, bursting its crop and scattering grain broadcast. It had been feeding on a stooked field on the far side of the valley.

Aeroplanes passed over occasionally, some high, others low, of all types, from the old-fashioned trainer 'crates' to the latest heavy bombers. This was a new note. Twenty five years ago there were no aeroplanes to disturb the country peace. But otherwise the scene would not be much altered. Yet on looking more closely I realized that the countryside *had* altered.

True, the oak would be no smaller twenty-five years ago; the may trees and willows would be growing, though the latter would be half their present height. But at the foot of the tennis lawn were three new trees, an oak, a walnut, and a sweet willow. And then I began to piece together the old scene, as I remembered it, and I realized that in those days there were many more trees which had now completely disappeared and which I had quite forgotten. For instance, half way up the meadow there used to be a fine apple tree in which a starling built every year, and over against the paddock hedge, a gigantic oak of which little now remains but a stump half hidden in the grass. Another new feature was a five-barred gate in the hedge yonder. And then I remembered a fence which used to run right across the meadow close to Peter Pan. This has now gone and the meadow is all one piece.

So gradually the country is changing, or rather the face of the country is altering. Trees grow up, others fall, fences and gates alter their position, ponds are choked up, others appear.

And then I looked onwards in time and visualized the trees, the oak, and walnut, and the sweet willow, grown to their full height. Perhaps 'Peter Pan' would not be growing then, only a stump sticking out of the red sandy bank.

One thing will always remain, the contour of the ground. There will always be the gentle slope of the field, and the little knoll at the head of the pond. And perhaps the first celandines will always bloom in their ancient haunt. One day perhaps the old house will go, and another be built in its place.

Three fine hairies came trooping down the mead and went splashing and blowing into the pond's edge, their velvet muzzles feeling and sucking at the water. When they had drunk their fill they slowly lifted their handsome heads and the water dribbled down in shining drops. Then, one after the other, they left the water and grazed away up the slope, whisking their long tails and tossing their heads, their coats shining with health. It is now holiday time for the farm horses, a respite from the daily toil of winter. They have well deserved this rest. In the quiet of the evening I could hear them cropping the grass.

August 22nd. A village street in August

THE main street of C—n is on a slope, one single street, rather narrow but with a footpath on the west side. I am standing half way down it, opposite the Three Jolly Farmers, the hot sun shines on my back. What do I see?

On my left a long wall, a mud wall, common enough in the West country, but rather rare in the Midlands. It is roofed with lichen-stained tiles to keep out the weather. Some of the tiles are ochre gold, in one place

the top of the wall is bare for the tiles have fallen off and there grass grows in the crevices. A strip of dusty turf and a few nettles grow between the footpath and the base of the wall. The surface of the latter is pitted in many places by small circular hollows as though sand martins had tried to drill their nesting holes. But those hollows are more likely to have been caused by stones and flints which have become dislodged from the plaster surface.

Another strip of turf divides the footpath from the dusty white road, starred with dandelion and grey with silver weed. On the right hand side of the street, past the Three Jolly Farmers and its hanging sign, is the Major's garden wall. Old bills are posted on it announcing sales of live stock and winter keepings, and there is a notice about potato disease. All are some years out of date. Then comes the ivy clad Manor farm, with its green fence, through which I glimpse a garden with bean rows (the scarlet flowers are as vivid as poppies in the sunlight) and an apple tree, each branch bowed down with green apples.

I cannot see the ricks and all the happy disorder of the farm buildings and stables, they lie to the right, behind the house.

Below the garden the buildings cease abruptly; there are no more cottages, just rounded masses of elms which hang right over the road. These lower branches catch straws and wisps from the passing harvest wagons. More elms and some elder bushes grow on the opposite side of the road beyond the mud wall. The church and the churchyard are behind me, as is the rest of the village, including 'squire's place', which is entirely surrounded (like a prison) by a high stone wall with spikes on the top.

The narrow white road dips down between the elms and beyond it divides, one lane bearing right for the 'turnpike', and the other, a mere bye-road, winds away into green and open grassland country with few trees. Standing at this spot I see the black and white finger post which stands in a little green triangle of turf. Only the stump is there. The two directing arms have been removed so that squat, crop-headed men in grey, with sub-machine guns in their hands, should not learn too much.

Over the top of this denuded sign post are the green rolling fields, and as I stand watching, a cow moves across, framed between two elm boughs, and is hidden. There is no shade at the moment, the fierce rays blaze directly down upon the street, and the heated air quivers. The walls on either hand reflect the burning sunbeams.

A white butterfly flies across the road, and a minute later, a tortoiseshell. The latter settles in the sunlight on the mud wall where it sits with wide-open wings.

Now and again a white-rumped martin sweeps past and curves up under the eaves of the Manor farm. They have their plaster castles there; as a boy I thought those nests were part of the architecture of the house, I could not

believe that birds had built them, for they seemed to stand year after year, tucked up under the eaves.

Somewhere in the elm trees a brood of young goldfinches follow their parents, keeping up a ceaseless chattering. Fledgling goldfinches are always vociferous and green finches are the same. Once the young have left the nest, the poor parents get no peace from dawn to roosting time. The brood keeps together in a body, following their parents wherever they go. Very soon the goldfinches will leave the quiet orchards and gardens of the village and go away to the wilder upland fields, where they will feed on the thistles; now their food is chiefly insectivorous. Perhaps this brood was hatched from a nest in the elm trees. They love to build right at the end of an elm branch overhanging a road.

Another white butterfly appears. It mounts high over the elms, up and up, until I see it against the blue of the summer sky. Dipping over the elm top it vanishes.

A single black cat now comes into view at the bottom of the street. It sits in the roadway, then runs across into the hedge, trotting on delicate pads.

Sparrows chirp. They come over the mud wall in a whirlwind of dusty wings, fighting and rolling over one another in the grit. For quite a minute they brawl among the white dust and every sparrow within hearing joins in. A sparrow fight is everybody's fight. At such times they are quite oblivious of the watcher, one may approach within a foot or two. No other birds quarrel so much. The trouble is usually over some disinterested hen, and the cock birds are the ones to start the scrap. The brawl is suddenly over, they all stream away over the mud wall and the wrangling chirps die away. How bright the red bean flowers appear amidst the deep green foliage entwined about the sticks, so cosily English, so summery!

A very old man now appears, moving up the hill. He has a full white beard and is dressed in an ancient skirted frock coat, with two buttons in the small of the back.

He moves very slowly with the help of a stick and one veined hand clasps the lapel of his coat. He comes on through the August heat one step at a time, steadily and surely. When he reaches the steep part of the hill he creeps more slowly, one can almost imagine that he changes gear. But he comes on. This old man is not a native of the place. He was bombed out of his Kentish village and is staying with a daughter-in-law at the Three Jolly Farmers. All his movements are very deliberate and meditated, characteristic of the aged, they are fascinating to watch. His main task, that of propelling his worn-out body up the slope, absorbs his entire concentration and energy. Nothing else can be thought of but this matter in hand. His eyes are fixed on the minute particles of the road, his mouth, slightly parted, reveals his toothless gums. Only a few more yards and he will gain

the Inn and rest. The veined hand looses its hold on the lapel for a moment, but it is only to take a firmer grip. Determination is in his every movement. He passes me without glancing up. It is a hot pull for the old fellow, hard work for an old heart which has beat through ninety three August heats! He does not see the scarlet flowers of the bean rows, he does not smell the dusty white road, the heavy elm trees and bleached grass. The butterfly passes unheeded. He must reach the top of the hill and rest. No doubt he thinks of the cool bar parlour, where the dart board hangs on the wall, and of the curious 'reflected' light of the room, the peace and rest. Can he hear the chirrup of the sparrows? Do the golden sunbeams warm his old blood as they warm my young blood?

So he passes, and a small shadow begins to edge out from the elms on to the roadway. The sun is moving across the sky, but still the hot hours of this August afternoon dwell here, the scorching sunbeams pour down into this trench of a street and seem to slumber there drowsily. The cool of evening is a long way off. There is more time for the sparrows to quarrel, the white-rumped martins will make many journeys up to the caves before evening comes.

The cat has gone, the old man has gained his objective, still moving as slowly as a snail on a garden path, not even a butterfly explores the elms. Only flies settle and sidle on the hot surface of the road.

Something I had not noted before shows over the top of the mud wall. It is the topmost rosette of a pink holly-hock. Even from here I see the sturdy breadth of a bee's back forcing its way into the heart of the pink frill. The holly-hock, strong as a tree, rocks the minutest fraction under the virile assault. Then the bee backs out, his pollen bags slung behind each thigh, reminding me of Chaucer's Miller riding to Canterbury, and away he goes (as Jefferies says, the bumble bee's weight seems to swing him along through the air), and the raped holly-hock continues to peep over the wall.

August 23rd. Butterflies in the sun

I WONDER very much where the Painted Lady (which I hatched on the twentieth) is now! Probably twenty or thirty miles distant, possibly more. How strange it is that such frail wings can carry a butterfly such a pace and so vast a distance; happy wanderers of the sun!

The hobby of entomology, and by that I do not necessarily mean the actual collecting of butterflies, is an interesting one. No other hobby or out of door interest is so connected in the mind with sunny weather. All one's butterfly memories are sunny ones, bright pictures in the mind which colour the dark days of winter. One of my most beautiful 'memory pictures' is of a rare British butterfly, the Swallow Tail.

During four very torrid days towards the end of a wet summer I

journeyed down to the Fen country expressly for the purpose of seeing, if it were possible, the Swallow Tail in its native haunts, a real wild Swallow Tail, which had not been re-introduced from another country (like the Large Copper) but which was indigenous to these Islands.

The fenland village where I was staying was very remote and away from main roads, and for this reason the good people were friendly and quite unspoilt.

As 'G.J.' and I were having our supper on the first evening of our stay our landlady told us that she had seen a Swallow Tail on the Buddleia in her garden only week or two before. They were often seen in the village, she said, for they came up from the 'fen'.

I have been told so often by rustics that they had seen rare butterflies, but I knew this woman was telling the truth.

On that first evening 'G.J.' and I sat talking in the garden until long after everyone else had gone to bed, and I remember the warm hush of that beautiful summer night, with not a breath of wind or a single cloud to dim the peaceful stars.

Next morning, you may be sure, I was off to the fen, as soon as the sun became hot enough to tempt forth the butterflies. On the way I passed the shocked up harvest fields, and men were busy on slender ladders among the plum trees of the orchards, gathering a rich harvest, for it was a bumper one.

Chains of white butterflies were everywhere, flying along in the bright sunlight, and playing about the gay phloxes in the cottage gardens, or over the reed thatching, for nearly every house in the hamlet was thatched with reeds from the adjoining fen.

Very soon I came to a drove or, as we should term it in the Midlands, a lane, hedged on either hand with high leafy elms.

At the end of this drove was a small open space entirely surrounded by thick trees from which a small path led to the Fen proper. As soon as I came within a few yards of this spot I immediately saw a very large mustard-yellow butterfly, striped with black, going back and forth in the sunlight, now soaring to the elm tops, now gliding in the manner of a White Admiral, and every now and again alighting on the heads of some long grasses in the middle of the drove. It was a splendid female Swallow Tail! Imagine my delight at discovering this lovely insect in such a setting. I had journeyed many miles to see it and here, as soon as I arrived at the Fen, was the prize I had come so far to seek!

For some time I watched it, spellbound. Never before had I seen so glorious a butterfly. Whenever a 'White', a Wall, or a Meadow Brown came anywhere inside the clearing, the Swallow Tail gave chase and saw it off. She evidently regarded this warm open space as her property.

Not far away was a flowering plant, not unlike valerian, which had a very sweet scent. I plucked a spray of this, and waiting until the Swallow Tail had gone a little way down the drove, I darted to the centre of her 'ballroom' and stood there with the flower in my right hand, holding it a few inches before my face. In a few moments something glided over my left shoulder from behind and there, sitting on the flower head, was the female Swallow Tail! She uncoiled her proboscis, and in a half-hearted fashion began to feed. I could see she preferred the joy, the new found joy, of her wings, and was impatient to be off. For by her appearance she had only just hatched from her chrysalis in which she had been imprisoned for so long.

She did not stay but was soon away, up and down, playing with other butterflies, and soaring like some exotic leaf high into the summer sky above.

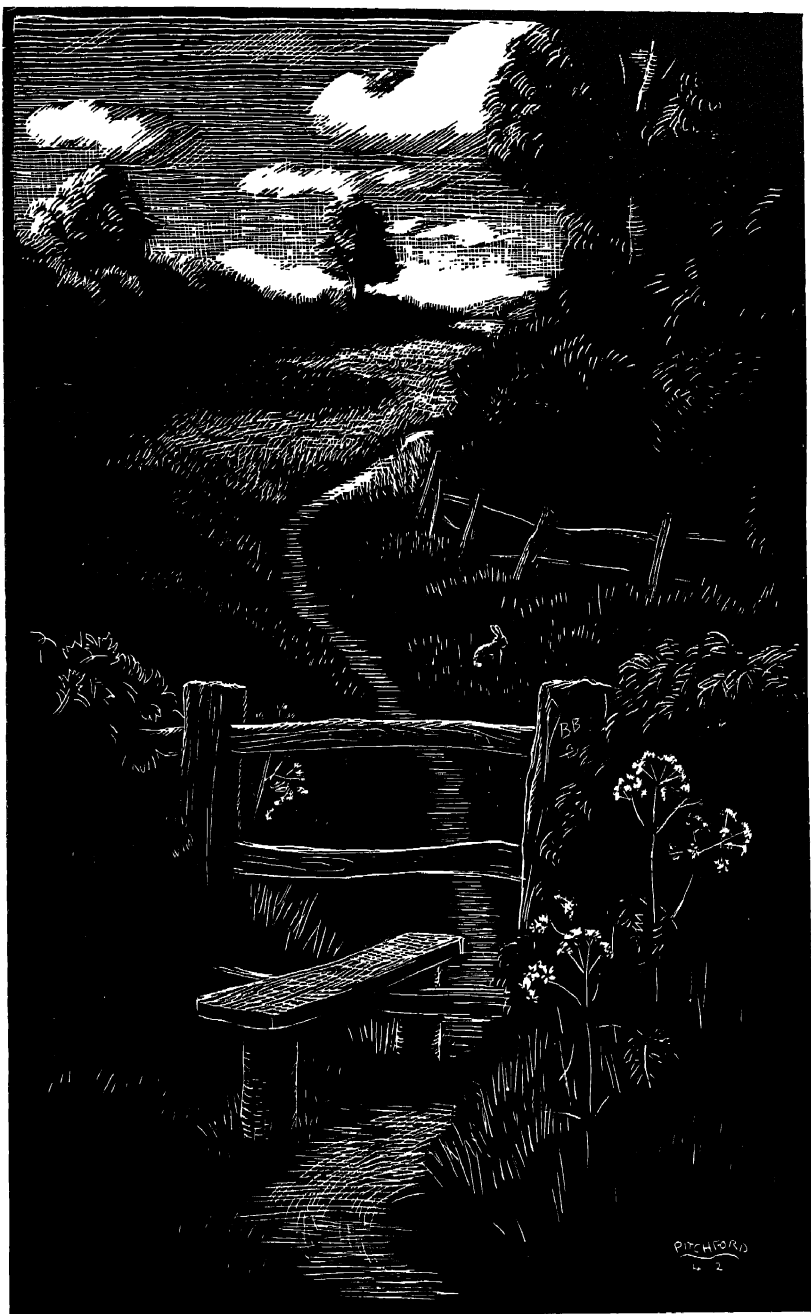
But every now and then she returned to settle on the proffered flower and when she had fed a little, and perhaps rested herself, away she sailed again in the glorious sunlight. I have had many wonderful experiences in watching animals, insects and birds, but this is one of my best memories.

Later in the morning I found a great colony of the handsome caterpillars of this butterfly feeding on the tops of the milk parsley plants growing in a remote pathway in the fen. They are fine looking creatures of a bright apple green, banded with black, and dotted with red. When they are annoyed a curious orange-coloured fork springs from their foreheads, which emits a very overpowering smell of rotten pineapple.

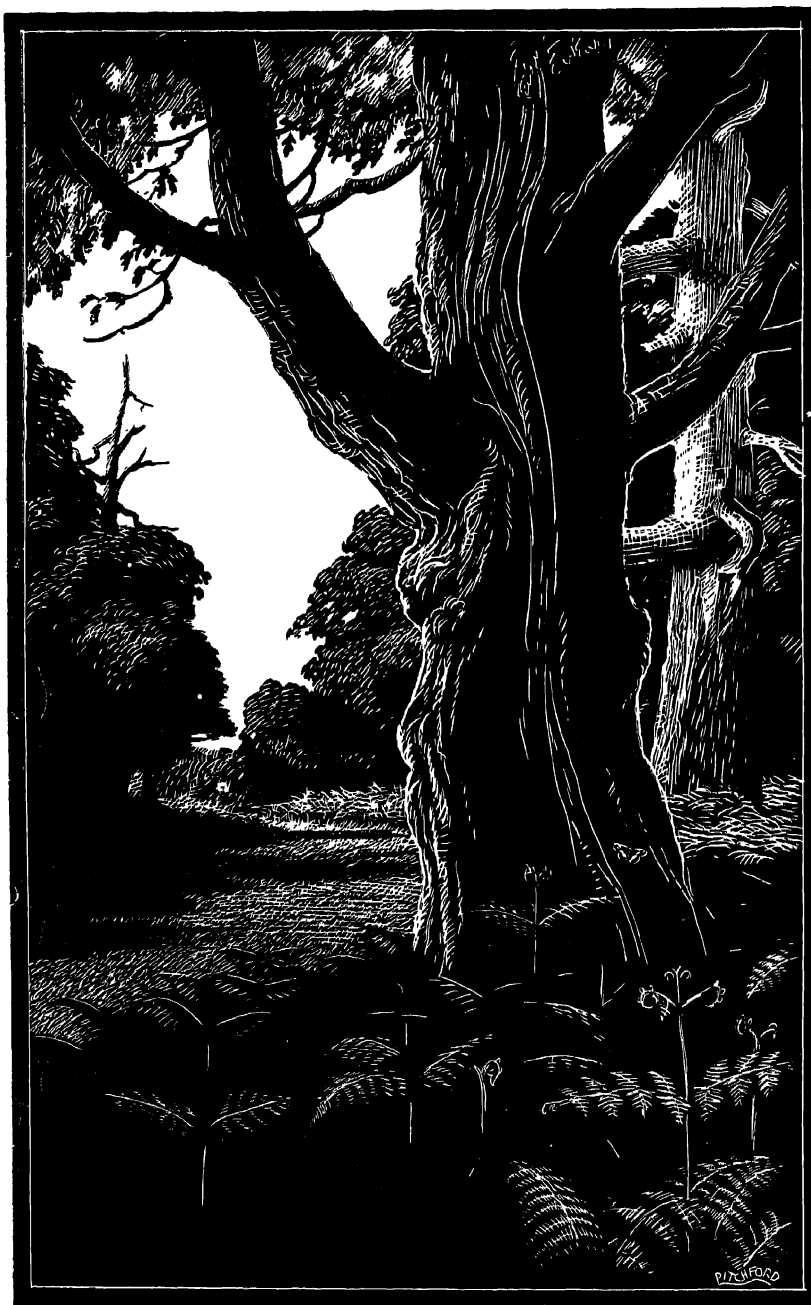
As far as I know there is no other British caterpillar which possesses this strange power. Birds and other insects seem to dislike this habit of the Swallow Tail larvae, for the caterpillars are conspicuous and feed on the very tops of the tall branching flower heads of the food plant and can be seen with the naked eye from some distance. One would think they would be easy prey to any passing bird.

In this same fen I found several caterpillars and eggs of the Large Copper. All these were on the underside of the leaves of Great Water Dock plants. The caterpillars, which must have been newly hatched, were no bigger than lice, of very much the same shape, and bright green in colour. They did not move with a 'rippling' motion like other caterpillars but seemed to glide along like tiny slugs. These curious little objects also feed on the leaf in a rather curious manner, eating out a hollow, in which they lie, but not eating right *through* the leaf.

A generation ago the Large Copper was found in the fens in its truly wild state, but the drainage of most of the flat lands of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk drove it away until, in the year 1866, it was considered to be extinct in Britain.



Summer Peace



The Haunt of the Purple Emperor

It is always possible, however, that a few remained unnoticed, especially in the more remote spots in the Norfolk broads, and they may exist there even today. The eggs and larvae which I was lucky enough to find were descendants of those introduced from Holland.

I brought back several of the Swallow Tail larvae and in due course they pupated. I was lucky enough to see this occur. The caterpillar turns gradually from a rich apple green to a faded yellow tint, and at the moment of pupation, it begins to rock gently in its cradle. This cradle is in the form of a silken girdle which the caterpillar slings round its shoulders for support and is attached to the reed stem on which it pupates.

After remaining quiescent for a day or so the dramatic and mysterious transformation takes place. A yellow film seems to grow downwards from the head, horns and protuberances appear, and this yellow covering slowly draws downwards to the tail, taking with it the skin of the head, which appears to be rolled up in a small bundle.

This fragment, or roll of skin, is carried to the extremity of the chrysalis, and then the pupa begins to wriggle with even greater vigour until the fragment is thrown off and falls to the ground.

In some ways the changing of a caterpillar to a chrysalis is more dramatic than the emergence of the butterfly. It is so hard to see exactly what happens. In reality, according to the long-bearded Professors who make a life study of these things, the skin of the caterpillar is split and the chrysalis emerges from within. But to see the transformation one does not get this impression. We have all read of the Magicians of old who could turn men into frogs and other animals. In witnessing this miraculous change of the caterpillar of the Swallow Tail one cannot help thinking that the larvae is under some uncanny spell.

The Swallow Tail was, at one time, found quite close to London, at Battersea and Tottenham, but has retreated before the tide of civilization to its last stronghold in the fens. Abroad, in Switzerland and Germany, it is common, and is found even in the mountains, so it is curious that here, in Britain, it should be restricted to swampy and fenny country.

But I seem to have wandered a long way from my description of that sunny clearing where I stood, with the smell of the marshy vegetation in my nostrils, and the hot sun of August beating on my bare head.

I know that birds find great joy in their powers of flight, but up to that moment I had never regarded butterflies as taking any sort of pleasure in the use of their wings.

But as I watched the wavering gliding shape of this beautiful 'Machaon' circling about me in the hot sunlight I thought that it was indeed revelling in the sense of airy motion.

One thing I noticed which was interesting. Whenever another butterfly

came within twenty yards she would dart off my hand and rush at it. She either sensed or saw the intruder a long way off.

Another thing I noted was that she would often fly down the drove, for a distance of quite forty yards, and would then turn and come back to the clearing where I awaited her. The reason no doubt was that there was a fresh wind blowing at the time, and where I was standing the trees acted as a screen so that the air was quite motionless.

I only hope that after I had left the place no prowling entomologist chanced along and captured my fairy in his net. No butterfly can look really beautiful pinned out on the cork. One must see it sailing in the golden sunlight, against a background of trees, flowers, or summer sky.

August 26th. North of the Border

It was a good journey up, surprisingly good, with the train only twenty minutes late at our destination. The car met us there and then began the fifteen mile drive over bad-surfaced roads, first through typical Border scenery, through thick and beautiful fir woods floored with fern, trees overshadowing the road so that the surface is rarely dry, luxuriant mosses on the grey walls, and glimpses of burns and rivers, the colour of beer after the rain.

Then it was 'goodbye' to the trees and low green meadows with their conical, almost Austrian haycocks, and then we began to climb among the bleached hills where, even in August, the mark of winter is still visible. The coarse grass is long and thick, constantly moving under the breezes. The high ground was veiled, grey clouds trailed low, pipits tossed upwards and fell away on the wind, no fence, hedge, or wall, separated the road from the moorland.

Far away a wondrous golden sun-gleam lit the head of an empty valley. On all sides the khaki hills, swelling one behind the other, were lost in low vapour, but here and there a high, bleached peak dominated the surrounding moors. Soon we saw the grey kirk and its little fir-girted churchyard, where many a sturdy son of the Border sleeps, whose life was spent among these forbidding hills. It is a man's country, breeding fine men.

And then, in the fine-spitting mist of dusk, we sighted the thick beech trees which shield the white Lodge, and saw blue smoke rising from its chimneys. Here was a Scotch welcome, here was food in abundance, such as we have not enjoyed since the beginning of the war; butter, cream, eggs, milk, meat, and those delicious rolls, which only the Scotchwoman knows how to bake! Bombs, did you say? Well, yes . . . one snowy night last winter a scared and blinded raider, fleeing for life and as lost as any old wild goose in a blizzard, dropped all he'd got near a farm, way back in the hills. He killed a chicken and frightened others; that is all.

Life is different here, only the wireless insists that England is at war.

This morning, when the trim maid called us with a cup of tea and an accent as charming as a Parisienne, we heard fine rain rattling on the window.

'A dour morning . . . ai ai' (always that little intake of breath, 'Ai Ai'). But dour or not, after breakfast Cecily and I buttoned ourselves into our mackintoshes and took to the hill.

The fine rain came from behind us in fierce gusts. It was not long before the calves of our legs were wet and necks damp. We climbed and climbed through thick wet grass, the rushy tussocks, and heather. We passed a burn, the colour of pale ale, which gushed between two massive granite boulders, and saw the yellow foam-clots revolving solemnly on the breast of a brown pool. We startled shaggy sheep which bounced away from us and then stood in a bunch looking back and down at us.

Over the high tops the drenching grey veils thinned. My eyes, fixed on the luxuriant knee-high grass which was so coarse and raspy, became aware of a speckled brown object. For a second I stared at it uncomprehending, and then the shape of a massive hare seemed to grow out of its surroundings. The ears were flat, the eyes wide. The shaggy long hair, black, tipped with grey, the purposeful bunched thighs ready to spring, all grew clear.

She was sitting in this form which overlooked the valley, a good vantage point. From here she could see the shepherd climbing the slope, dog at heel, and the sheep, rotund white maggots, running before him. She must have seen our ascent of the slope, she must have spied us from the very moment we left the Lodge.

What cared she for the level darts of rain, and the wind, which blew square into her retreat! I could have shot her as she crouched there. I moved my foot instead and in a flash she was gone, jumping sideways, slewing round, first here, then there, until the ridge hid her from view. When first she darted from her form she carried her ears flat, but as she drew away they came up like signals, black-tipped and close together, straight up.

We gained the ridge above us, expecting to see all Scotland spread before us, only to find yet another ridge. We passed two coal-black sodden peat stacks, and then at last reached the top, and saw wave after wave of faery hills laid out in a magnificent panorama. The mist was rolling away and as we stood together on the summit, with the cold wind on our left cheeks, the sun came out and gilded all those many-folded silver swellings below us.

We went on. Heather was here, purple flowered, the slope we were descending gave shelter. It was a likely place for a grouse. So I was ready,

when, from behind a little knoll, two grouse burst forth. My gun was empty in an instant, the reports barely audible in this high windy place. One of the birds tumbled in a cloud of floating feathers to the heather. The first grouse of the season! We then fetched a wide circuit to avoid a particularly nasty looking bull, which stood blowing and grunting on the fringe of his harem, and then from some long grass on a level plateau another single grouse rose, wild. The wind caught it, tilting and curving it. The swinging barrels followed the white wing bars and at the first shot it fell into a patch of heather, thus making a brace.

When we turned about at last the wind met us, but the rain had ceased. Westwards the hills appeared through the breaking haze and a large patch of blue sky was above 'Ettrick Pan' and tender lights and shadows appeared on the face of the moors.

Rainbows seem to be few in this part of the world. The sun, shining through distant rain veils would, in England, have produced a double rainbow, but here was none. A bee swung past above the pearly heather-bells. The whole individual smell of this country came in a gust as we turned to meet the wind. What a country!

Is there any land to compare with Scotland? No wonder its sons are virile and strong. I have always thought the deep-sea fishermen to be cut above the ordinary run of men, as they have more philosophy and dignity. So it is with these sons of the Border, whose life is spent among the lonesome moors and hills.

After tea we ambushed pigeons, which were coming to some laid wheat. They came in hundreds, waving grey scraps against the far beech trees. One I shot fell in the standing crop and I could not get it.

As evening came I saw a team of mallards fly up the river and pitch on a pebbly foreshore. I made a wide detour behind a loose stone wall and rushy bank and surprised the whole party. Two birds fell to a right and left, wollop, splash! One fell in the swift current and I plunged in after him. Away he went on the sliding brown water, heading for the Braeburn Pool, but I caught him by his neck ere he was swept on to the brown breast of that deep place.

There was a big peat fire waiting to warm us when we reached the Lodge and the fat spaniel, Daisy, lay asleep on the hearth-rug.

August 27th. The wet moor's face. A storm

AGAIN in wind and rain Cecily and I tramped over the hills. But, unlike yesterday, no gleams of sun enlivened the sodden scene. I first tried the hill where yesterday I found the grouse but I drew blank. So I left C tucked up in the bed of a little burn and set out for another distant hill which lay to the North of me. I crossed a flat and dreary waste of bogland, where cotton

grass fluttered and pale green hummocks of spagnum moss oozed water at every step. Hare tracks were everywhere but no hares. Twice I saw grouse droppings but they were old and brown.

After what seemed an age I reached the foot of the hill, wet through with perspiration, for at every step the tangled grass and heather reached above my knees. I came to a spot where a burnlet came tumbling down between rounded boulders, singing its way from granite step to granite step. In the shelter of a steep bank a rowan grew, leaning over the burn, its boughs thick with scarlet berries. So much loveliness with so few to see! How scornful of Man is Nature! This tree was here for Nature's own delight and for the enjoyment of the wild things. No doubt the black-game came for these berries, perhaps the grouse did too.

It had been difficult walking across the 'flats', but on the higher slopes the grass was not so long. A reddish tinge flooded all the lower slopes which, at a distance, gave the impression of heather. As I climbed higher the wind increased. At the summit I looked over a steep valley down which flowed a lonely stony water which had cut a deep groove, or fold, between the slopes. Beyond, hill after hill fell away, one behind the other, to the horizon, where a final higher range met and seemed to enter the sky. A shepherd stood on the opposite hill watching me. It must have been an experience for him to see a man walking on the moor, maybe he thought I was a German parachutist! As I stood looking at those far hills I thought how strange it was that in all probability I should never set foot upon them. I thought of the numberless little burns hidden from me now which my eyes would never see. An odd and foolish thought.

After standing a while on the summit I fetched a circle round the hill. A hare started from the heather some way off. I took a shot and at the discharge the animal seemed to vanish. When I reached the spot only a single tuft of fur was blowing on the heather. The hare had vanished mysteriously! I was astounded. The hare is a large animal and I have sharp eyes. Then I saw the reason. There was a sheep track running at right angles to my path, arched over with long grass. It had evidently slipped down this and was probably by now over the far hill. These snap shots are very difficult, far harder than a dodging snipe. I turned back into the wind and after a deal of hard walking rejoined Cecily, who was still curled up in the bed of the burn. It came on to rain heavily before we regained the Lodge, where we lunched off plump chicken and young carrots.

In the early afternoon the glass dropped alarmingly and the rain came down in sheets, blotting out the distant view of wood and river. Notwithstanding the wet we went out after tea and stood under the beeches, as numerous pigeon were still visiting the oat field.

From the smooth pillars of the beeches the rain dribbled, they were like

leaky gutters. The trunk of a plane attracted my attention. Here and there the bark had come away and showed the red-brown inner bark, pale greeny-grey lichen grew upon it and bright green seals of moss. The rain seemed to bring out all the rich colours into a rare harmony, just as moisture will beautify a common pebble.

Despite the heavy rain the river remained at its usual level, it still ran clear and low, and was not in the least 'drumly'. I have noticed that it takes a considerable rainfall to bring these Border rivers into spate.

August 29th. The ancient stone circle

THE gales and rain of the past few days show signs of abating, for now the wind has dropped and, this evening, calm sunlight flooded the hills. I waited again by the oat field for pigeon.

I crouched down behind a little thorn tree which grew in the fence, a poor sort of hide, and the result was that when an odd pigeon did appear he saw me and turned aside out of gunshot. I had been sitting under this tree for some time, letting my eye roam over the oat field, the beeches, hills and river, when my attention was arrested by some massive grey stones standing in the adjacent rushy pasture. Close to the stones the grass was short and of a very vivid green, it almost looked as though it had been cut with a mowing machine. As I looked at these stones my interest grew into quite an excitement, even a sense of awe. For these stones were no ordinary haphazard moorland boulders. They were arranged in a perfect circle. On the western perimeter were two very massive blocks, much higher than their fellows. The ground within the circle was perfectly level and the field sloped up to them on all sides, so that they seemed to be standing on a level plateau, which appeared artificial. This stone circle was obviously Druidical.

I am no antiquarian. I am more concerned with Life as it flows past me at the moment, but I could not help reaching back into that dim ocean which lies behind us. I thought of the men who had placed those stones there, Heaven knows how; of their dress, of what language they spoke, and of the appearance of the country in those dim far-off times. And I came to the conclusion that little would be changed in the appearance of the scene. The hill would rise across the water, with the wind rippling its grass terraces, tier upon tier of shining grass rising to the sky; and the same river, rushing, rushing, down its stony course. The fundamental things would be the same. How did those people live, what rites were practised within the stone circle? No iron railing hemmed it in, no notices were posted round this miniature Stonehenge.

As I lay thinking on these things a big brown hare came creeping over the rim of grass in between the solitary stones. It sat in the exact centre of

the circle, with ears flat, appearing like another smaller rounded stone embedded in the short green turf. This animal was ancient too; like the hills and rivers and the silent stones it had been unaffected by the passage of the centuries. Why did it crouch there in the very centre of the circle? I sensed something quite uncanny in this experience, there was something rare in it which I could not explain, I should remember it.

Man is changing, but these stones, the river and hills, and the brown hare will not change. I heard the dull roar of the river and the wind among the bents, the creak of the iron-barked thorn tree above me. Always this river will go scrambling on down the stony course, always the wind will sing among the tiers of upland grass and the brown hares crouch among the boulders.

At last the hare roused itself, and, as though it had completed some secret rite, it hopped away between the two upright blocks. I suddenly had quite a different feeling about this wild country, I saw it through new eyes. And this Stonehenge, it was incredible and dreamlike, set in this green valley and the silence of the hills.

How well firs and larch grow in this part of the world! They seem to thrive in the peaty soil. A little wood below the Lodge is fascinating. Both sides of a burn have been planted with spruce and larch. The burn gushes down the centre of this wood, half hidden by large boulders. All this beauty so close to the house, yet it is fenced away! I imagined what could be made of this natural garden and what a fairylike place it could be. Streams are so common in this part of the world, nobody takes any notice of them.

Every time a rain storm comes on, some hens, feeding in the adjacent meadow, rush into this little fir wood on the banks of the burn and stand there until it is over. Some may be feeding right out in the centre of the field, but as soon as the first drops fall they spread their wings and half-running, half-flying, jumping in prodigious hops, they gain the thick shelter of the trees. This evening I too sought the shelter of this sanctuary when an exceptionally heavy shower swept down, and in climbing the wire fence which separated the wood from the road, I jabbed my hand badly on the wire, driving a barb right in up to the hilt. It was quite an effort to wrench it out.

I pushed in among the thick trees, whose trunks grew very close together, and waited there in the dark shadows, with the hens for company, until the heavens should 'cease fire'.

After a while I was startled to find that I was not the only human fugitive from the storm. Looking along the wood, between the reddish stems, I saw a dark shape crouched at the foot of a tree. It was a tinker. On

seeing that I had spotted him he came forward and began to talk. He told me the woods would soon be all gone as the Forestry Commission were going to fell every tree for miles around. There would be no cover then for the poor tinkers.

These Scotch beggars are curious folk. How they manage to live through the bitter winters I cannot conceive. In England the tramp can always find some sort of shelter and beg a bit here and there, but it must be a very different matter in the North, some of the farms being a day's march apart.

He began to talk of the neighbouring farmers who had been kind to him.

'There's Mr Macpherson, for instance, up at Gordlestane, he's a good man, though he can't stir a foot now.'

'And how is that?' I enquired.

'Why, he's struck with a paralysis and can't move his arms or legs, poor gentleman. You see, one day he was out on the farm and he cut his hand on some barbed wire. Nasty stuff is barbed wire, poisonous stuff, Sirr.'

I looked at the tinker sharply. He could not have seen me stab my hand on the wire as I climbed the fence into the wood, for I had come in from the far side and would be hidden by a bank.

The rain was clearing, sunlight began to flood the far slope of the hills and the hens ran out once more into the sparkling meadow. I thought too it was time to be moving, this miserable old tinker who croaked like a raven was depressing. And, was it my imagination, or did my hand seem to be throbbing viciously, where I had stabbed it on the wire? I had no wish to be like 'poor Mr Macpherson'!

August 30th. An Albino rabbit and a stoat. Evening on the hills

A PEEP out of the bedroom window this morning at 7.30 a.m. revealed a wonderful transformation scene. Overnight the low rain clouds had gone, together with their herdsman the West Wind. The sky was palest blue, with one or two very high cirrus. And the early sun was shining full on the massive beeches in front of the Lodge and the shadow of the house was traced on the wall of brilliant golden-green foliage. Every leaf was motionless.

Looking past the beeches I saw the river, back to its normal size after the spate, and beyond were the slopes of the hills enamelled in the fresh light with blue-glazed shadows in their folds. Here and there I could see the tiny circle of a sheep pen throwing a strong shadow, and the patches of bracken, which gave the slopes a rough and shaggy appearance.

Grey boulders, each with a strong shadow, were dotted about, and

away to the North, the mass of peaks, unbelievably beautiful in the silver light of morning. The air smelt of the sea, though it was really sweet with the odour of damp heather and bracken.

Pigeons were already busy on the oat field. I could see them flocking down from the beech trees, and as I stood at the window, an important-looking heron came sailing on cupped vanes over the valley, gliding lower and lower until the bank of the river hid him from view.

After breakfast, Cecily and I walked down to the Braeburn Pool in the hope of beguiling a trout, and there we saw a whitish creature crouching on the stones and shingle. It was an albino rabbit and a wild one at that! It ran along the shore until it reached the grass and a second later I saw a stoat in hot pursuit. I saw the little beast come up behind the rabbit and the latter allowed it to come within a foot of it before moving. Then it did a surprising thing. It ran over the shingle and waded into the river until the water lapped its chin. It appeared exactly like a white stone set in the current.

Meanwhile the stoat (they always hunt by scent) was completely non-plussed. It made no attempt to follow but turned back into the grass. A minute later I saw another rabbit leap high into the air, twisting and turning as it did so. Evidently the stoat had found another victim and had missed his mark. After sitting for some time quite motionless in the water, the albino rabbit turned slowly about and went back into the grass and I saw no more of it, nor did I see the stoat again.

Later in the morning I had a close view of a Hobby. This little hawk passed close to me, the reddish flanks clearly visible. It went into the fir plantation on the banks of the burn, where I had met the tinker.

In the evening C and I went up the hill again. As we climbed higher the view increased, no longer partially veiled by low cloud, for now the sky was clear; it was a most beautiful still evening. The hills lay bathed in the low sun, range behind range, as far as the eye could see. On reaching the summit I saw a pale object sitting in the heather with the light shining full upon it. At first I thought it must be a hare, but on coming closer it rose into the air and flew off. It was an owl with a very wide wing-span, probably a short-eared owl.

Just here a grouse rose, becking wildly. It was forty yards away but it fell to my first barrel, a fine plump bird. We found it without much difficulty, even though we had no dog with us. And a moment later another bird, which I also took to be a grouse, rose in front of the setting sun. I fired again. The bird fell, and after a long search we found it, a hen pheasant!

What this bird was doing so high up on the moors I cannot imagine. We turned back for the Lodge and went slowly along in the golden

light, putting up four fine hares from a marshy level, all of which were out of range. The hills were now clear-cut, with sharp edges against the setting sun. Far below we could see the shining bow of the river and the dark pine clumps by the Lodge, and away in the distance, across the water, the tiny conical hay cocks in the river meadows. Long-legged black flies (crane flies I suppose they were), danced up and down over the heather in their millions. There are still many swallows about. In a big barn I saw a nest of young ones nearly ready to fly. Later, after dinner, I strolled down to the river on the chance of a duck but I never saw one. A man was fishing on the far bank and for some time I watched him. He hooked a fine trout in the Braeburn pool and after a considerable tussle landed it, though what size it was I could not see as he was too far away. But I heard his reel singing and saw his rod bent into an arc. I wished that I had brought a rod instead of gun, for the fish were evidently rising. As I came back up the oat field two hares were hopping about in the little green meadow by the Druidical stones.

The last day of August. Spiders' webs in the dew


On going out early this morning I saw for the first time the webs of the autumn spiders. They were slung along the beech hedge by the side of the drive up to the Lodge. These beech hedges are very common in the Border country and they retain their bronze foliage throughout the winter. The webs were so numerous they seemed to whiten, or rather silver, the whole length of the hedge as though it were covered with hoar frost. One web was three times the size of its fellows and was slung from the tips of the twigs by three main cables. Another cable was two and a half feet in length and had been attached to the tip of a sorrel stem growing in the ditch. How do these spiders attach their cables in the first instance? Looking up the hillside behind the Lodge I saw the dew was on the grass, which gave the whole hillside a very frosty appearance. The sun was just breaking through the fog, which wreathed all the higher slopes, and each dewdrop and spider's web was illuminated from behind. Down by the beech trees were six pheasants, and on the oats, flocks of wood pigeons. They seemed to know it was the 'Sawbath'. One or two rabbits were with the pheasants, stretching themselves at full length in the warm rays of the sun like cats before a fire. Everywhere the crane flies were in evidence.

The grey mist was driving down the valley before the same old West Wind which has haunted us all this last week. I decided I would pay one last visit to the Druid's Circle and would try to find another stone circle which, so the 'locals' told me, was higher up the river. It was rough going over the tussocky grass and numerous ant mounds. Only the lower slopes

of the hills were visible, the grey vapour swirled down the valleys and the wind moaned in the rowans. Before long I saw a huge granite block poised on the very edge of the river bank and scrambling up an amazing sight met my gaze. There was a circle of thorn trees on the edge of a cornfield and inside the ring of trees was another 'Stonehenge', larger than the first I had discovered.

I looked around me. On all sides the hills seemed to shut me in, I was in the centre of a vast green bowl along the sides of which drifted ghostly vapours. The wind moaned in the thorn trees and all the while the nearby river added a continuous undertone. As I topped the bank and looked into the circle quite a score of wood-pigeons arose from the corn which grew close up to the massive blocks. The birds had been feasting on the laid grain and some had been resting in the thorn trees. I looked again at the river flowing by and it seemed a link with those far off times, when men worshipped here on the ground on which I stood. Perhaps in those distant years the river did not flow down its present course; indeed, when I looked more closely, I saw traces of the old bed some distance away across a flat meadow. Lying in the centre of the river was a large recumbent stone which was originally one of the circle.

No doubt the river played an important part in the mystic rites of sun and Nature worship.

I examined the stones carefully. On one recumbent block I traced a depression like a half circle, thus: 

Did this rough carving represent the rising sun? A fat yellow spider peeped out of a cranny and hustled in again. I passed on to the next massive block (I believe the correct geological name for this particular stone is Greywacké), and on glancing down I saw a plump little vole scuttle into a hole in the turf close by its base. After all, thought I, mice and spiders live in Canterbury Cathedral!

And all the time, as I wandered alone from one stone to another in that lonely spot, I heard the river keeping up its continuous chant. Always that sound had been a constant thing in this place, the running water is more durable than the stones, that glittering water which, if I took some in my palm, would drip away into the turf!

I remembered that strange historic fact about the White Esk, how on one February day in the Eighteenth Century a thing happened to this river which must have filled the minds of the Eskdale men with superstitious awe. *The river ceased to flow!* I can vividly imagine that happening. The voice of this beautiful river slowly dwindling, until an uncanny silence reigned all down the valleys!

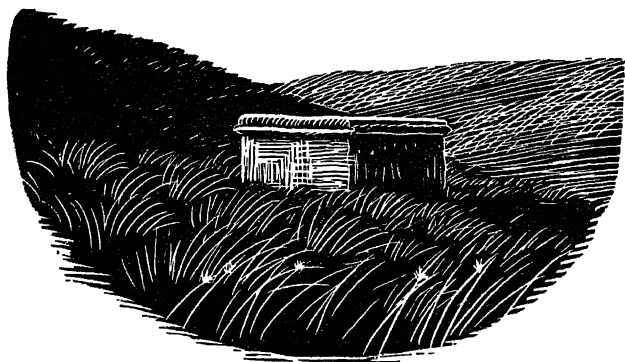
I could imagine the horrified trout, slapping and kicking on the fast drying river bed, the silver salmon gasping among the boulders, or fran-

tically endeavouring to reach some deep granite-locked pool. For some hours the river was stilled and then it slowly began to run once more, gushing ever faster until it was singing its age-old song.

What form of worship was practised within the stone circle? We do not know, we can only surmise. The date of its erection would seem to be 1290 B.C. The priests would no doubt watch the sunrise each morning from the centre of the circle and would see the bright disc creep northwards until it reached a certain gap in the hills. Watch would be kept for a certain star, Arcturus, in another gap; movements of sun and stars would enable them to fix the passage of the year and the beginning of the agricultural year, which was May five, and so on, until the sun again turned back upon its course until the first day of Autumn was reached, August the eighth.

All is forgotten now, all is past. The men have gone, those strange robed priests, the beautiful women, the strong young men.

A dipper flew past and perched on the mid-river rock where he bobbed up and down. The mist thickened, the wind whispered, and the corn, heavy and brown, made obeisance.



CHAPTER VIII

Autumn

September 1st. The Martyr's grave

All day the mist had wreathed the hills and as evening approached a sombre shade seemed to settle in the valleys. In such weather I came upon another romantic relic, the martyr's grave.

It stood forlornly alone upon the misty hillside, sheep browsed about it, moving with nodding heads among the wet grass. It was a square stone box with incised lettering on the lid, rudely carved on the massive slab. In the humid quiet, broken only by the caw of homing rooks and the brush of the sheep through the dew-laden grass, I stood looking down upon it, wondering, thinking, my imagination reaching back to that day in May when a brave young fellow was done to death by evil men for courageously holding to his beliefs. So pitiful, so wasteful it seemed that this young man should have been denied the years of life which were his due. What was the story which ended upon this misty hillside?

This man who sleeps below, who was he?

His name was Andrew Hyslop, aged nineteen years. Nineteen years—a boy! He worked on a farm at Eskdailmuir with his widowed mother and her younger children. A Covenanter happened to die in their house and was buried at dead of night in a field adjoining the cottage. John Graham of Claverhouse and Sir James Johnston of Westerhall heard of this, found the grave and barbarously disinterred the body. They burnt the Hyslops' house, and the widow and her children were turned out on to the hills. Andrew was away at the time or he might have had the satisfaction of revenge before they trapped and killed him.

On May 10, 1684, young Andrew and three companions were resting

by the Whinshields Burn, in the parish of Hutton adjoining. I can see them lying in the heather, their horses cropping the grass. Perhaps the sun shone and the whaups cried above them, where the same bleached grass I see today met the sky. Oblivious of the horsemen coming upon them they lie talking in low voices. Andrew is chewing a stem of heather as he listens to the rushing of the burn hard by. Perhaps the sound of the brown water drowns the approach of mounted men.

Suddenly one of the Covenanters sees the head of a man bobbing over the skyline. Foolish to be caught like this, with no scouts on the high ground.

Instantly they run for their horses. Three of the men swing into their saddles and are away. But Andrew's horse is young, like his master, and is hard to catch. The sudden commotion alarms it. Away it goes, riderless, after the others, tail streaming and mane tossing. Andrew, with a sickening dread in his heart, turns to face his stoatish pursuers. He is full of youth and life, his limbs are fleet, but against mounted men he is helpless.

Under his tan the blood rushes to his face. It would be improbable he had firearms, a dirk perhaps, maybe not even that. He sees the soldiers fling themselves from their saddles and Claverhouse draws his pistol and covers the defenceless man.

The sound of the rushing burn and the natural sounds of the birds seem suddenly poignant to Andrew and his heart hammers like an anvil.

They bring him over the hills into Eskdale. (News of the capture has been rushed to Sir James Johnston at his camp at Johnston.) And he hurries with his soldiers to the scene. They meet the prisoner and his escort at Craighaugh, not far from the farm flanked by the plane trees, which would then be putting forth their green young leaves.

Sir James is for shooting Andrew on the spot. He rants and raves at the steady-eyed lad. 'Shoot the rebel', he splutters, 'shoot the rebel on the rebel's land!'

But Claverhouse's heart is sick at the thought of butchering this boy. He argues with Westerhall and suggests first this, and then that; he cannot bring himself to do the foul deed. At last he blurts out, 'The blood of this man, Westerhall, be upon you. I am free of the business.'

Sir James growls like a savage beast, 'Take him up the hillside and shoot the rebel. I will be obeyed!'

So they take Andrew to the west of Craighaugh farmhouse. The boy glances wildly round for a chance to escape but there is none.

A few yards distant is a grey stone kiln and it is then that he asks for a moment or two to pray. This is granted, so he enters in, the soldiers standing by the door. Andrew falls upon his knees and prays. His heart is

thumping wildly but he is no coward. Within the kiln his eyes take in the rough stones.

Up in one corner is a wren's nest, a cosy little house of dried beech leaves gathered from a tree which grows beside the farmhouse. He hears the low murmur of the men talking outside. Now his mind is so vivid and alive, all his senses so aware, his sight, his hearing, and his feeling. A shadow darkens the door, 'Come, you have prayed enough'. Sir James has grown impatient, he has bidden the soldiers to have done. So they lead him to the hillside, to a little rise in the ground, a slight knoll. Andrew sees the rolling hills which he knows like the palm of his hand (where he has herded the sheep and caught the spotted trout), sees them patched with sunshine and shadow. He sees also the swallows sweep by over the rippling grass. High in the sky two rooks pass, so free and distant, for the Esk.

Then Sir James orders the Highland Captain to shoot. But the latter, sensing the electric atmosphere, and, like Claverhouse, backing like a scared horse from so foul a deed, bursts out, 'I will not shoot him'. Angry words pass. Claverhouse swings on his heel, wanting to put the blame on some other head, orders three of his own men to shoot, and commands Andrew to draw his bonnet over his eyes.

But Andrew's heart has ceased to thump, there is a sudden calm after a great storm within his soul. A flaming scorn surges up within him. 'Why should I do that?' he asks Claverhouse, 'I have done nothing to be ashamed of, and I can look all of you in the face.' The soldiers hesitate with their muskets in their hands. Sir James Johnston sees his victim escaping. He senses a tide of feeling rising against the perpetration of the deed. There is a quick movement of an arm, a fraction's steadying for the aim, and then a single dry report rings out on the hillside.

The sheep grazing on the hill above raise their heads for a moment, they stop chewing the sweet grass and gaze, puzzled, at the knot of men below. One man has fallen, the others are looking down at the still figure. Then the soldiers fling their legs over their saddles and canter away down the slope to the road.

A tiny grass spider runs across the plaid of the utterly still man, who lies face downwards on the grass.

.

Sir James and his men ride past the farm. They are on their way to Langholm. And that night, in Langholm castle, Sir James, despite his well-filled belly, cannot rid his mind of something lying on that lonely hillside, away in Eskdailmuir. He paces up and down, restless . . . fidgety.

.

I put my fingers down to the rough slab and traced out the letters.

'Here lyes Andrew Hyslop
Martyr. Shot dead upon this
place by Sir James Johnston
of Westerhall. John Graham
of Claverhouse for adhering to
the word of God Christs
Kingly government. . . .'

May 12, 1685.

Old useless quarrels! . . .

It is said that the descendants of Sir James Johnston have tried to have the stone removed, for the deed is still remembered. But the stout men of Eskdailmuir are there to guard it.

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September 2nd. The last night

WE went up the hill behind the Lodge for our last tramp tonight and found a world of ghosts. Heavily lay the mist about us, transforming the slopes and hills most magically. It was not a cold evening, indeed it was warm, though a fine mist tingled on the cheek.

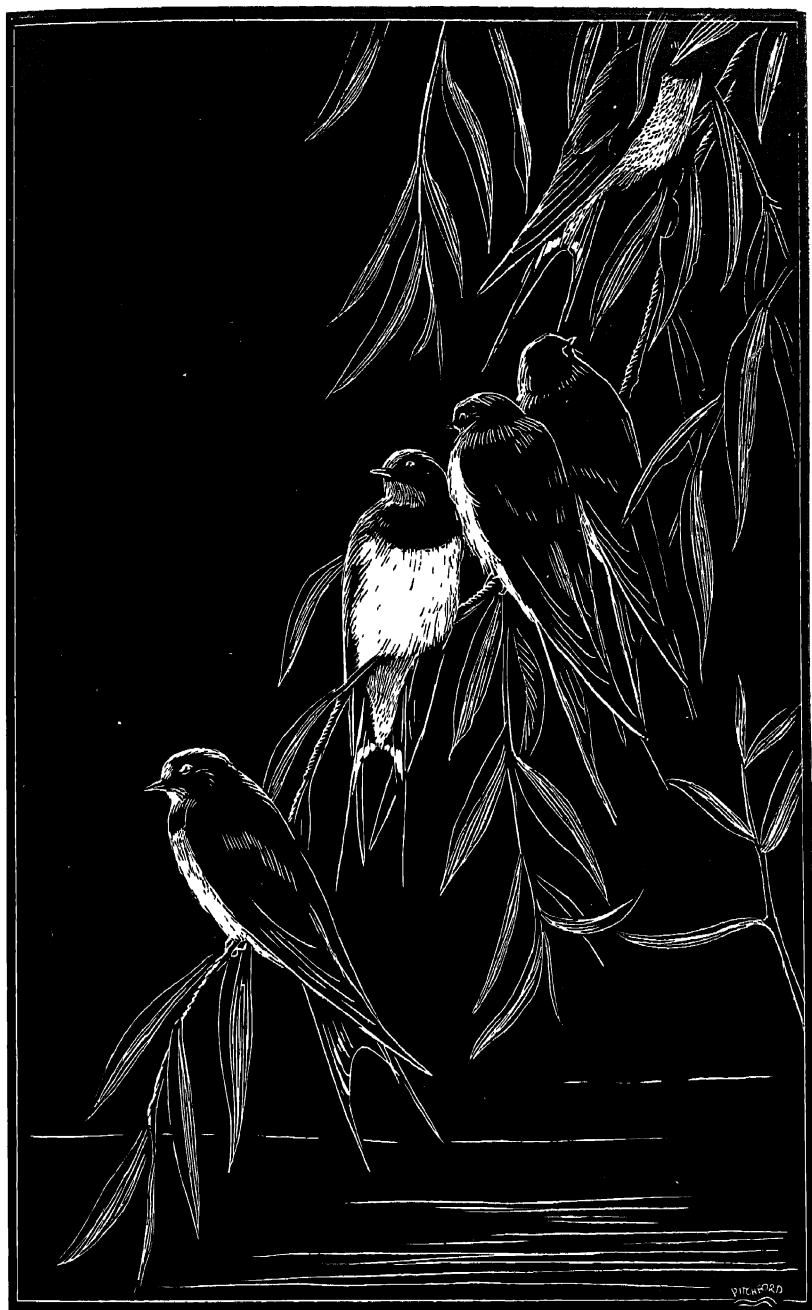
Down in its rocky bed the burn suddenly loudened as we came over a rise in the ground, and looking below us we saw the yellow water frothing between the rocks and flat suds spinning away to the neck of a swift brown pool. The massive hills enclosed us, appearing like the backs of whales, magnified by the fog.

A hare started from some tussocky ground and ran away down the bank to cross the burn at its shallows. It went spurring up the opposite slope, from terrace to grass terrace, until the fog hid its fleeing form. We heard it cross some loose shale and even after the beast had disappeared small stones rattled down. Then came a wide-winged owl, sweeping through the mist; noiselessly he came and went, and the swirling vapours hid him too. 'Hill owls', they call them here, or 'moor owls'.

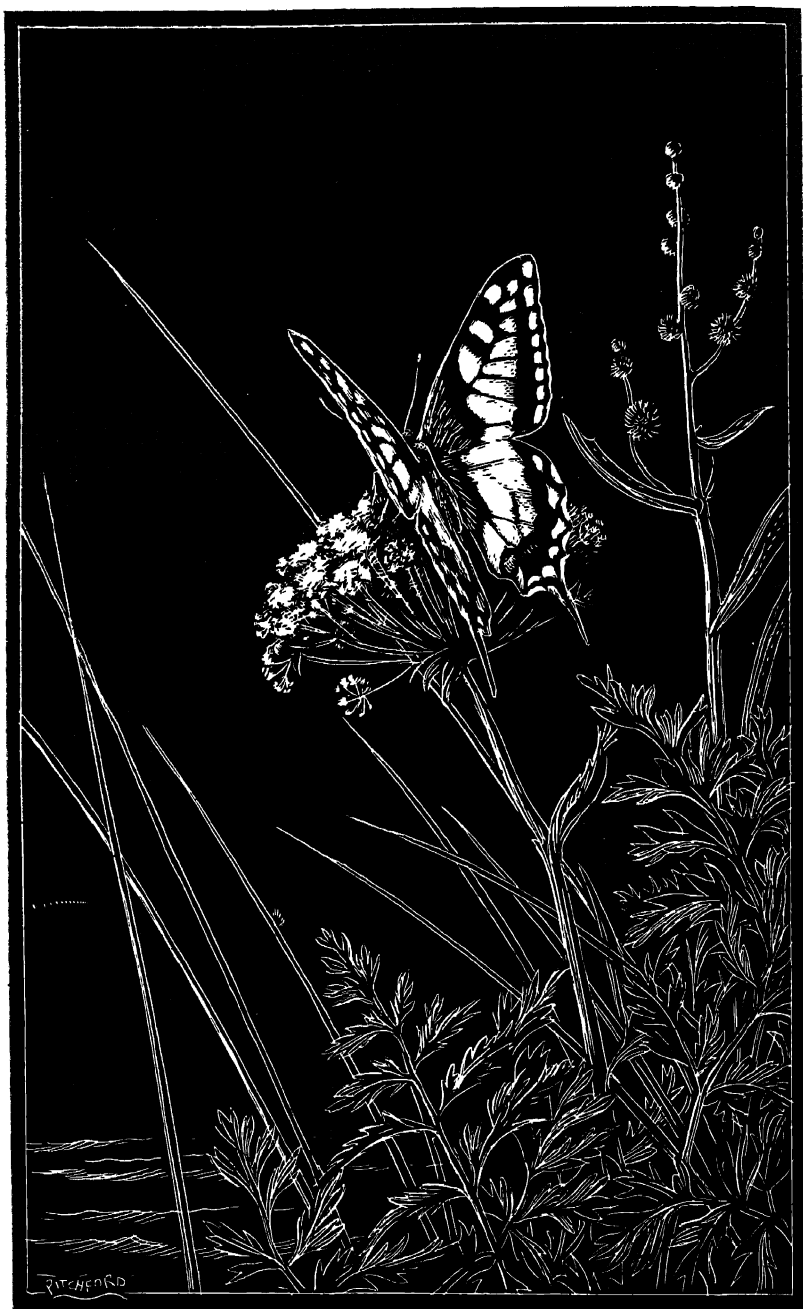
The dusk came quickly and as we reached the Lodge the fog had thickened so that visibility was only a few yards.

September 5th. Autumn heats

THE hot weather has come again and promises to stay. In the mornings the grass is thick with dew, and even in the full sun this moisture does not dry off until midday. Here and there are the first hints of autumn. The elms and limes show spots of yellow and the level of my ornamental pond drops rapidly with evaporation. I have noticed that it also evaporates very



The Swallows in the Willows



The Loveliest British Butterfly

quickly in the spring, but at mid-summer, indeed, all through the summer months, the level does not vary much.

On the Buddleia in the garden I saw the first party of Red Admirals and one gorgeous Peacock butterfly. Rooks and starlings have begun to circle high in the sky, the latter catching flies, or simply indulging in the joy of flight. All the birds seem filled with a great restlessness. The shy warblers and the flycatchers become unduly bold, venturing right up to the house to catch flies on the windows. And this spell of fine warm weather has dried out the sodden harvest and every available man is among the crops from dawn to dark. As far as the eye can see are stooked fields, few are carried as yet. If I can spare an afternoon, I shall be after the pigeons which are coming for the Major's wheat.

These birds are the most serious enemies to the war effort. The quantity of grain they can put away is astonishing. Later on I expect many of these entries will be describing my nightly visits to the various woods and spinneys where I await the incoming birds as they come to roost. This form of shooting has a great appeal for it takes me into the deep woodlands, into the peace and quiet, where beauty is everywhere; even in winter, when the branches are bare, the woods are enchanting.

September 6th. Greater spotted woodpecker

A GREATER spotted woodpecker came into the garden this morning and searched the tips of the young Douglas firs, presumably for insects. These gaudy woodpeckers have quite a 'foreign' appearance and are not by any means common. I doubt if one visits my garden once in three or four years. The sun has gone again and in its place we have humid damp weather with a good deal of fog. It looks as though much of the harvest may be spoilt.

September 10th. Pigeon shooting in the harvest

THE heavy blight still rests over all the country. I took the gun and a pocketful of cartridges and wandered over to the harvest field. Many of the fields round about had been carried, but this one, the last to be cut, will be in stook for some days yet.

I built my hide of sheaves against a low thorn hedge, in nice range of an immense ash tree. It had scanty foliage, even for an ash, and near the top one bare branch protruded horizontally, an ideal 'alighting board' for pigeon.

I crawled inside the hide and pulled a sheaf over my head. The wheat smelt like fresh paint. Through my loophole I could command a section of the field, with its neat rows meeting the skyline. There was no breeze, the sultry autumn haze cloaked the distances, rooks cawed ceaselessly. One

old fellow soon came up into the ash above and perched on the dead branch, quite unaware that death was lurking so near.

I watched him very closely. There is a fascination in spying on a bird as wily as the rook. First, he bent his head sideways, and made a shrewd examination of his surroundings. He glanced at my hide, but even his sharp eyes failed to see me. After a minute or two he had satisfied himself there was no danger anywhere near. He fluffed himself out and wiped his great bill three or four times on his perch. Then he cawed, leaning forward and fanning his tail. The rich harvest, the warm autumn afternoon, and his sense of isolation gave him pleasure. He felt 'good', he had no cares in the world. 'Caw! caw! caw!'

Then he cocked his head again and scanned the neat shocks of grain spread below for his enjoyment. He wiped his bill once more and dropped from his perch into space. His sable wings, glossy with health, were spread and he glided down on to a stook.

A faint whirr sounded directly over my head and a finch came and perched on the sheaf above. It was so close I could have touched its fluffy breast. This reminded me of a most curious incident which happened to me once at Holy Island. I was out one moonlight night on the 'slob' of Fenham's 'Slakes' waiting for duck. I had made a hide of stones and was sitting down, keeping quite motionless, when I saw a wigeon gliding in. There was no time to raise the gun, so I waited. The next second it had settled, actually *settled*, on the top of my head! I was so startled, I moved, and that wigeon must have had the fright of its life. I can never understand why the bird should have chosen to alight on my head. In any case, the ducks will nearly always alight on the muds, and never on a rock. My head would have appeared very like a rock, as I was surrounded by a low wall of stones, but even then, the whole incident was puzzling.

More finches came and with them sparrows. Nearly all settled, either on the stook above, or in the hedge, before going to the sheaves.

Then I heard the wings of a pigeon passing and a hasty shot had no effect, beyond putting up every rook, finch, and pigeon, in the field. The rooks flew round cawing hoarsely, circling about, trying to find the hidden gunner. One or two actually came and alighted in the ash tree. But later I did better. I soon had six pigeons in the bag and missed two others, both easy shots.

One of the reasons why pigeon prefer ash trees is that they are somewhat clumsy birds and need room for a 'take off'. The ash tree is always very open, it has no thick tangling branches. A wood pigeon quitting its nest in a dense may-bush has quite a business to get free, and usually leaves some feathers behind. But once on the wing, few birds have so swift and direct a flight. In the spring they devour the ash buds (no doubt this is

another reason why they like the tree so much), and when the buds have formed, an ambush built within range of an ash will sometimes be very productive.

One of the birds I shot this afternoon was a stock-dove. Like the jack-daws, the stock-doves build in old parkland elms, in holes and hollows. They are excellent eating and invariably very fat.

There are few turtle doves this year. Why is that? Last year they were very common. I never shoot these graceful little doves, though they can do considerable damage to the crops.

September 19th. By the woodside

It was hot by the woodside, not a breath of wind could reach the field. We have had two days of this, after weeks of cloud and rain.

I stood close to the hedge and my eye roved over the bright yellow flowers of a cabbage field hard by. Over this sea of colour floated myriads of butterflies; Whites, Red Admirals, and Peacocks. The air was heavy with the scent of the million, million, flowers and there was also a faint odour of decaying vegetation, not the fresh summer smell of growing things.

Beyond the yellow field lay the calm expanse of the lake, with not a ripple upon it save far out where some boys in a boat were angling for pike. They had stripped off their shirts and brown bodies gleamed in the sun; their shouts travelled across the calm water which acted as a sounding board. It is curious how sounds are reflected, as it were, from the surface of a large expanse of water. I was talking the other day with a keeper of an adjacent reservoir, and he told me that during the battle of Dunkirk the sound of the guns was plainly heard by people fishing in the middle of the lake.

A heron passed along, flying so close to the surface of the water that his wing-tips just skimmed it with every downward stroke. On all sides was the harvest. In one distant field I could see a cart moving and heard the creak of its wheels and the chatter of the labourers in the quiet afternoon calm.

A yellow object appeared, flying swiftly over the cabbage flowers. It drew nearer and I saw it was a butterfly. It was a Clouded Yellow! It passed close to me and appeared to be an excellent specimen. And a little time after I saw many more.

Owing to the continued wet I have seen few Painted Ladies. Had we been so fortunate as to have sun at this 'back-end' it would have been a good year for them.

The sun blazed down, and the spaniel, teased by flies, buried her face in the long grass, whipping her muzzle round ever and again to snap at them. Busy, the labrador, lay in the full glare of the sun; she never seems

to suffer from heat. This spinney is a favourite haunt of the roosting pigeon flocks. It is a curious wood, with extremely thick undergrowth which has been planted as a fox sanctuary. When the sap is rising the thorns on the blackthorn are very poisonous, and several scratches which I received last year turned septic and gave me much pain and bother before they healed. One or two pheasants live in this wood but not even a dog can shift them. They run like rats under the thickets and will never face the open.

When I at last shifted my position and began to walk along the hedge-side a very mangy fox jumped out of the cabbages in front of me. Its body was almost hairless, so I shot it. Busy the labrador ran forward and mouthed it, as though she would retrieve it, but I called her off.¹

I found a Poplar Hawk moth caterpillar on the Sweet Willow in my garden tonight. This would be the offspring of the pair of moths I found in coition in the spring. It was almost fully fed and in a short while will be going to ground, there to sleep through the long months of winter.

The starlings hawk like swallows these calm September days and the sparrows do so too. The latter birds devour a good many insects in the autumn; no doubt they find flies a welcome change of diet, as they have been stuffing themselves with grain from the harvest fields.

October 2nd. Clouded yellows

In the warm sunshine a Clouded Yellow flew past as I walked with C down Sperrywell lane. And later I saw yet another, on some yellow flowers in a cottage garden. The Clouded Yellow seems to prefer yellow flowers. It has been a good season for this insect, a real 'Edusa year'. Among other interesting things noted, was a wheatear perched on the road, no doubt passing on migration. It is the first one I have seen about here. A few swallows wing lazily about through the misty skies, house martins with them. No doubt all are birds of the year.

The trees are still a sombre, later summer green, very few show any signs of turning as yet, no doubt this is due to the excessive wet.

There comes a time when one finds oneself looking forward to seeing the trees bare, just as in spring one longs to see the trees in full green leaf. Just now I am weary of the shabby green of the summer-worn foliage and shall be glad to see the branches bare. Mists hang about all day, there is a new smell in the air. I often think that the country has more 'smell' to it in winter than in late summer, the damp seems to bring out all the subtle essence of the earth. Just now my little garden is crammed with birds. Whole broods of blackbirds and thrushes, tits and finches, crowd the water garden. My pond is quite a favoured bathing resort. Up in the

¹ Some weeks after this incident the Labrador developed mange and it was nearly six months before I could cure her.

rockery I have placed an old 'corn staddle', a mossy mushroom-shaped stone, set on a massive pillar. For some reason these stones have gone out of favour in this part of the world; in the old days nearly every rick was raised on these quaint stilts.

Peewits have made an appearance on my shoot, a sure sign of the advancing year. On one particular field they are massed in some numbers. They will stay there for a week or two and then move on. Since the Bird Preservation Act was passed, scheduling the peewit as a protected bird, it has increased enormously and I think the ban might well be lifted. When meat is so short a plump peewit makes a very welcome change of diet. They are of better flavour, in my opinion, than snipe. But they are trusting creatures and are slow of flight, there is nothing sporting in the shooting of them.

Up under the beech avenue I notice the fat wood pigeons. They come now in the early mornings before there is much traffic on the road and stuff themselves with mast.

Last night Toby and I had a great rabbit hunt in the garden of the old rectory. Below the tennis lawn is a dense bed of nettles and briars, and when we sent the dogs in, two rabbits broke cover, one going down the fence side (where Toby dealt with it) and the other darting out close beside me, giving a 'going away' shot which was successfully accomplished.

It is well to note here that the Poplar Hawk moth caterpillar has gone to ground under the sweet willow.

October 17th. Duck shooting

THE curtain of trees across the meadow (over which William Webber makes his way, pubwards, in the summer evenings) is now wearing thin. The garden is a mass of sodden leaves, mud-coloured and black. The sycamore sheds cart-loads of leaves all over the little lawn before the French windows. Yet in the brief sun gleams I saw a Comma feasting on the Michaelmas daisies and with it was a fine Admiral.

Last night I went after the duck. The little angle of wheat-field where I waited for them in August is now, of course, cut, and so is the larger field hard by. A strong easterly wind was blowing, playing a wild and romantic tune in the telegraph wires. Westwards there was a break in the clouds, a gaping rent of palest primrose which lit up the water so that it gleamed like a bright sword blade beyond the dark band of reeds and willows. Mallard were quacking and I heard a widgeon's 'weeo', which, as sure as the cuckoo's voice, tells of the passage of the year. A great concourse of peewits was encamped on the muddy margin of the lake, just in front of the willows, and as I stood waiting I saw others dropping in to join them

from all quarters of the compass. Some of them hurled themselves downwards with a vertical motion, the wind 'burring' in their pinions.

Now and again I heard the unmistakable note of a greenshank and the grating 'scaape, scaape' of snipe. The latter flighted out to the ditches at nightfall exactly like duck. Some of them passed overhead, their swiftly moving slender bodies barely visible against the dying light.

When it was almost dark the duck began to *arrive*, and not depart as I had expected. They came in low, as thick as starlings, though unfortunately across another field which adjoins my shoot.

The leaves are falling now and in the lanes they drop continually, some wavering down, rocking like boats from side to side, others, like the ash leaves, fall more directly. As I drive past Hollow's spinney some alight on the bonnet of the car and are blown up against the windscreen and remain there fixed by the pressure of air.

A few swallows are seen and warblers still come for a bathe in the rockery pool.

This is a difficult time of year for filling the larder. In the woods the trees are too thick in leaf and the hedgerows choked with weeds. Rabbits can slip away unseen and unscathed, and it is yet too early for the big pigeon flocks.

But with an occasional rabbit here and there, and a pigeon or two, we keep going. In another month things will be better and the larder should be rarely empty. Then I can go to all my favourite haunts; Wildwood, Tanglewood, Hodgson's Spinney, and the rest.

The Germans are at the gates of Moscow but the Russians still hold them doggedly, a brave and determined people. Occasionally a ~~reider~~ *reider* passes over here o' nights, and I see the dim wheeling reflection of a searchlight's beam in the rockery pool.

I see that swinging rod of light pass behind the half-bare twigs of the birch trees and, far away, the red firefly flicker of Ack Ack. Japan, inflamed with the lust for war, will soon be against us, already she prepares, this war will ring the globe.

But by Hollow's Spinney the yellow leaves still fall silently. I see a tattered Wall butterfly go past and settle for a moment on a warm bank.

October 18th. The little summer of St. Luke

Two sprigs of pink may on October 17th! Unbelievable, yet there they were, the wee pink flowerets, those neat rosettes, half open in the hazy sunlight. I had pruned back these trees in July because they were becoming too straggly and these late flowerets are the result.

And in the hedge not far distant, which borders the stony lane to the brook, is a sprig of honeysuckle in flower!

It is now the Little Summer of St. Luke, that last glimpse we have of the halcyon days; a lingering backward glance at those summer afternoons by the Folly, when Cecily and I swam in the Willow Pool. At such a time, and in such weather, it is pleasant to amble along the country roads a-wheel. It was Hudson's way of seeing the country. So this afternoon we went out of the village on to the Harboro' Road and, taking a side turning, we were soon lost in a maze of little unspoilt by-roads below the Marston Hills. In the fields, stooks of sodden, blackened, wheat still remained, though most of the fields had been cleared. Rooks were busy in the stubbles, partridges creaked and whirred away. Fat grey wood pigeons clattered up from under the oaks where they had been feasting on the fallen acorns. In the hedges the hips and haws glowed a vivid scarlet; a feast for the birds in the bitter days to come! These berries are their iron rations.

I found the hibernating caterpillar of a Yellow Tail moth. As I looked at it I remembered how, as a small boy, I found a great company of these gay caterpillars feeding on some hawthorn. I shall never forget that discovery. The hawthorn spray was swarming with them, brilliant carmine and black creatures, covered with tufts of long hair.

Eagerly I gathered as many as I could, putting them all into a white handkerchief. But, boy-like, I became bored with carrying them, and after a while threw them away. The day was hot so I must have mopped my forehead. At any rate I soon became aware of a slight itching on my face. I rubbed the place with the handkerchief and it itched the more. Soon the irritation grew, all over my face, hands, and neck. I was in absolute agony. The intense itching was far worse than any pain I have ever experienced. I was almost driven demented. I went across country like a scorched cat, tearing and clawing at my face and neck, and arrived home almost on the verge of collapse, with a bright scarlet face. The fine invisible hairs of the Yellow Tail caterpillars had worked their way into my skin. In future I left all 'woolly bears' severely alone.

The evening was soft, calm and warm; sounds of bird and beast carried far. Predominating was the caw of rooks. They were sitting in the roadside oaks and elms, with raised crests, happy and contented, not stirring as we went by underneath with uplifted faces, only cocking their bright eyes sideways at us and cawing all the more. Autumn is their favourite time. Well fed after the harvest, not yet starved by cold and forced to work all day on the sticky half-frozen ploughlands, they take their ease. Their glossy backs shine like metal in the sun's rays, they radiate contentment.

Already the pigeons are beginning to flock. I saw very many feeding on the stubbles with the rooks, though pigeon and rook habitually keep apart. Plovers too, were ranged along the newly ploughed ridges, their white

droppings lay everywhere on the dark earth. Moulded pied feathers lay in the hollow of the furrows, black and white feathers on dark soil. On the damp surface of the road the leaves lay in flattened sodden carpets, though the first heavy rains will wash them all into the ditches. In the old days, before 'tar mac', they lay all winter, trodden into the muddy surface; the roads smelt more sweetly in my childhood. On the hard metalled surface the water soon dries up and the leaves dry with it. A puff of wind and they are gone. Even in the depths of winter one may now walk almost dryshod on the new roads. It was different thirty years ago, one had to don goloshes to walk along the main roads and 'Wellingtons' for the bye-roads. The modern country child cannot know the romantic beauty of a muddy road, or the smell of it, or see the countless silky ridges of mire, moulded by passing wheels, but I remember those roads well.

As we went along our bicycle wheels brushed through the fallen leaves under the oaks and elms with a soft 'slurring' sound. The narrow wet band of slotted rubber was fascinating. We seemed to glide so effortlessly, so smoothly, over the damp surface, and if I half closed my eyes, the fallen leaves made a softly tinted carpet of colour, a different colour under every tree.

And then, as dusk fell, we turned our machines homewards and went back to the bright fireside, where we found the spaniel and the labrador fast asleep on the hearth-rug. These simple pleasures are all that the countryman desires, surely; all he wants is time to enjoy this little Summer of St. Luke, and to have his own cosy home fire to sit by when his wandering is done.

I saw a very strange thing this morning as I came down the village street. A small grey object was scuttling down the very centre of the road between the houses. As I got nearer I saw it was a grey squirrel. Luckily no dog was about and no village boys were out of school to give chase. It darted along from side to side, apparently terrified by the lack of grass and trees. It must have found itself in a nightmare of a place. At last it reached the entrance to Sperrywell Lane and down this it ran, to find cover there.

Anyone who has studied country children (of the ways of town children I am quite ignorant) will notice that they have their special seasonal games. Now it is 'trucking' time, 'trucking' and 'conkers'. The variety of home-made trucks is astonishing. They recalled my own trucks. Most are mounted on pram wheels, one 'luxury model' has a motor horn affixed and is a two seater. Trucking is almost as popular as tobogganing if there is a fairly steep hill down which one may career. To the child mind these home-made trucks are vastly superior to the ones you may buy in shops. But nobody attempts to construct a self-propelled truck, all are designed to function under the laws of gravitation. A companion usually supplies

the motive power, sitting with his back to the 'steerer' and kicking with the heels. 'Red Indians' belongs to the spring months, as do 'hut building' and kite flying, though the latter pastime has nearly died out. As to hut building, one sees small occupants of blanket tents enduring terrific heat quite cheerfully and without complaint. Even an army bell tent can become almost unbearable in hot weather. Hopping games have never been popular with country children, but now so many evacuees have arrived, the village roadways and pavements display many unsightly scrawls. But in time the town child will take to the country games.

Most games, such as Red Indians and hut building, seem 'childish' to the adult, but we forget how every game is coloured by wonderful make-believe. Even the most ordinary objects are transformed. There are certain parts of gardens (and I suppose parks) which affect the imaginations of children. I remember many outwardly ordinary areas of our own old garden which were held in great respect, even awe. One place I remember was a clock golf course at one end of a lawn, flanked by shrubberies. In the centre hole dwelt 'the Daughter of the Evening Star'. This wonderful fairy was never seen by us but we knew she lived there. And I remember a perfectly ordinary gate to a stable yard which used to exert a great fascination for me. Beyond it lay a magic land, a remote self-contained country whose houses were made of iced sugar and the presiding king a French chef in a tall white cap.

Animals, birds, trees, grass, and flowers, the sky and the earth under, are magical things to a child; minutes are as hours and days as years. And it cannot be wondered at. With a dawning consciousness they find themselves in an enchanting world, every day promises fresh delights and new wonders. They are explorers in a new country.

As we grow older these fancies drop away, we see things in their truer perspective. The trust of the child in facts and statements becomes shaken by blow after blow and the first shadows begin to steal across the unclouded sky. At thirteen years the most magical time has past, never to return.

And this reminds me of one fact about my own childhood, which might be here set down before it is forgotten. I used to experience a sudden rush of delight and utter joy which overwhelmed me with a sort of thankfulness and exquisite well-being. It was more in the nature of an ecstasy, or 'transport', of happiness. The future lay before me, limitless, full of eternal pleasure, pleasure in the sky, in the grass and birds, one never-ending holiday.

Then a kind of passion would seize me, I would run wild, rolling over and over, burying my face in the grass of the meadow, uttering strange cries, incoherent and shrill. One sees the same thing in birds and puppies

(puppies especially). These 'transports' grow less and less keen after the age of thirteen is reached, becoming, after a time, a mere sudden warm glow inside, and ultimately they cease altogether.

October 18th. The fall of the leaf

THE gritty rattle of windblown rain lashes the window as I write, yellow leaves whirl madly, the bare twigs whip and bend. My rockery pool is no longer clear and sparkling, weary leaves choke the brook, and the lily pads are rotten. The pond is a mere inky-black hole set in the grass of the lawn, the stones in the rockery almost invisible under a blanket of restless leaves. One birch tree I see is dead, the bark has turned grey and bubbly, it does not bend before the wind but jerks from side to side, there is no sap of life within its core. I see no swallows now, the gales of the last few days have swept them away with the leaves. But somewhere those birds of summer are still alive and full of life, just as the trees are full of life, though they are anchored in one place, one with the pulsing earth. And I know the swallows will return with the birch tree buds.

Two years ago I planted a yew hedge in my garden. The bushes were seven or eight feet high and all have survived, all are throwing new growth. The yew is hardy and if the leaves are watered in dry weather they are not difficult to transplant, even when eight or nine years old. It is useless to water the roots of a newly planted yew. It absorbs its moisture through its leaves. Water the roots in a drought and you may lose the tree, but if you moisten the leaves it will live.

Some of these yews are now covered in fruit. The colour of the yew berry is particularly beautiful.

October 23rd. Wildwood again

IN days of peace October and November are almost my favourite months. Even the blight of war seemed far away this afternoon as Cecily and I made our way to Wildwood. The sun was glorious and the wind cutting cold. Well clad in rubber coats and waders we set off on the little two-stroke. How merrily the little engine purred! The dead leaves were whirled aside as we sped along through the sweet air. We went direct to Wildwood, leaving the machine under the lichened wall, and walked over the shining wet grass towards the wood. On all sides the trees were full of autumn colours. From the ivy-clad oaks in the hollow a multitude of rooks and daws arose with a great cawing.

By the woodside the grass was wet, for the sun had not reached it all day. Now and again a leaf fell, softly, yet with suddenness, giving the impression it had retained its hold to the last possible moment and was dropping, utterly exhausted, to the ground. Three moorhens scuttled

across Wildwood pool and immediately took to the underwood, as is their habit. These Wildwood moorhens are peculiar in this respect. Usually this species will dive and hide under water until danger is past, but these birds never do this, they have found by experience that the wood is safer. I have seen them, in midwinter, when the boughs are bare, walking from branch to branch like chickens at roosting time.

We approached the little crooked gate in the wall and as we came up to it a wood pigeon arose with a great clatter from under an oak. I saw it rising steeply, grey against the dappled shadows and sun spots, and my shot brought it down among some nettles. Quite a prize this, after many weeks without much meat. For some time afterwards, small blue feathers floated about in the glade.

It was a fine young bird, very plump, and was speedily in the bag.

Since last spring this wood has grown up a good deal. All manner of bushes arched over and partially blocked the path and the sun shone through and behind them, seeming to light them from within with hidden fire. At the head of the ride I turned aside to search the brambles; they were soaking wet, and the spaniel dived in and began rustling about. But though she scented many rabbits she could not push one out. The cover is still far too thick and not even a snap shot was possible. Two more pigeons were perched on a bare branch but they were too wily to allow an approach. I pushed back to the pool and managed to shoot a moorhen. I am fond of these birds for the pot and I always think they have a better flavour than snipe. We had no other shot during the rest of that afternoon, but it was delightful to wander through the woods and smell the fallen leaves, and see the sunlight dappling the amber foliage. Alas! nearly all the big trees are marked for felling, all have the fatal white spot on their rough trunks.

There are a few partridges about. I had a brace this morning out of the Major's roots, both Frenchmen.

Poor old Sparkie, my spaniel, will have to go to the Vet.'s shortly to be operated upon for milk glands. This is a common affliction in bitches which have not been allowed to breed. She is a strange little dog. When alone with me she behaves well and shows her best paces, but if I take her out in the shooting field with other guns she usually seems to show her worst side, possibly through nervousness. This reminds me that in some respects I resemble her! I find that when I meet people I very much admire and wish to know better I show the most awkward side of my character; I become either inarticulate, idiotic, or simply woodenly stupid. In this way I have lost wonderful friendships which might have meant so much to me. I see clearly now-it was my lonely childhood which is the cause of this 'awkwardness'. Life gives no second chances to over-sensitive people.

October 29th. The coming of winter

Many things seemed to happen this afternoon which brought home the nearness of winter.

I took the twelve bore and the retriever (Sparkie having been sent to the Vet.'s), and motored to Tanglewood after tea.

All day the wind had blown a gale from the north, and as I started out, the sky grew dark and the first snowflakes whirled, blotting out the landscape. From under the tall beeches on top of the hill flocks of finches flew up from the beech-mast. A great many had white rumps and rich chestnut markings. Bramblings! The first bramblings of winter! I saw at least forty of these richly-coloured finches and they did not seem shy. They hopped about in the lower branches of a hedge waiting impatiently for me to pass on and leave them to their feast. No doubt they were very hungry after their long journey.

And when I dropped over the five barred gate on to the stubble a flock of fieldfares arose and flew away 'chuck chucking' as they went. They soon settled again out in the stubble, rising before me like larks as I advanced, the rear birds 'jumping' the main flock and settling in front.

And then, when I reached the lee of the wood, I saw one small bird hawking up and down. It was the last swallow of summer! It is not often one sees swallows, bramblings, and fieldfares in October, and snowflakes falling at the same time.

Why did this swallow linger here on this wild autumn night, what were its chances of ever reaching a sunnier, more kindly, land? He swung up and down, back and forth, in the calm air of the woodside, never venturing out into the open where the wind raved and the snow whirled. This wind, which was now tearing at the shabby outworn oaks had brought the fieldfares and bramblings. Perhaps this lone fugitive was waiting for a favourable wind to bear *him* away.

As I walked slowly along, a host of pigeons swept overhead, taking me completely unawares, but a hurried shot took effect and Busy bounced out into the kale to bring a bird back to me. It was not a foreigner but a plump English-bred pigeon. The big 'foreign' flocks will be arriving nearer Christmas time. These are much smaller and not so 'blue' as the English-bred birds.

I hurried on because I knew that with the wind in the North any other pigeon which came would go to the southern end. I reached the far end of the wood at last. The yellow glare of the setting sun was in my eyes (the snow clouds had temporarily passed) and those level blinding rays seemed unreal. Once within the trees it was more calm and quiet though overhead the tops of the oaks were threshing and rocking. Despite the lateness of the

season their leaves were thick and few showed the buff leather colour of dying leaves. The wet summer is responsible.

As the sun dipped down beyond the lake, party after party of duck arose and headed inland in the teeth of the wind, but all were high and out of gunshot. Soon some more pigeons came over and a snap shot taken between the gaps in the trees proved successful. Busy again returning in triumph with another bird.

As I waited under the oaks the sky grew bruise-coloured and sombre, the leafy shadows above were gloomy and forbidding. Now and again there came a violent gust of wind which tore some of the leaves from their hold, whirling them far out into the field of kale. The West grew wan and the sheet of water reflected it, glinting through the darkling trees. A lonely spot this, with not a soul within a mile of me! Very soon these oaks will be bare, it will be difficult then to find cover to ambush the pigeon, as the underwood of thorns is too thin for a hide at this spot. Handfuls of leaves went spinning up among the oak tops and eddied about between the boles as if dancing a death dance. More pigeons blundered in, higher up the wood, and very rapidly the light drained from the sky. Snow began to fall once more. So 'that's the way it is'. In these last few hours winter has come. Today corresponds with that first day of spring when the sun shines warm and we hear the tentative notes of a newly arrived willow warbler. Never have so many 'winter things' come on the same day, fieldfares, bramblings, and snow. That poor hunted scrap of a swallow made it all the more poignant. There was something inexpressibly sad and romantic in that lone mite, true bird of summer heats, striving to find some sort of food and shelter in the calm air beside the rusty wood. How sombre was this autumn evening, yet it was beautiful too. I get a primitive 'kick' out of such a night, as, gun under arm, I wait in the thickening shadows. Pigeon in the bag mean good rich meat, and I get the primitive hunter's glow of satisfaction when my shot speeds true. Some men regard the sport of shooting much as they regard golf or some other pastime, they do not have the true hunting instinct. A good straight drive at golf is much the same to them as a high shot at a pheasant, they are not concerned with what happens to the bird once it is shot. That is not my way. These pigeons I bagged tonight were beauties, as fat as butter, and with crops bulging. And I like to feel the gun in my hands, to see its well-oiled breech click open and the glossy grain of the stock glowing as richly as a ripe horse chestnut.

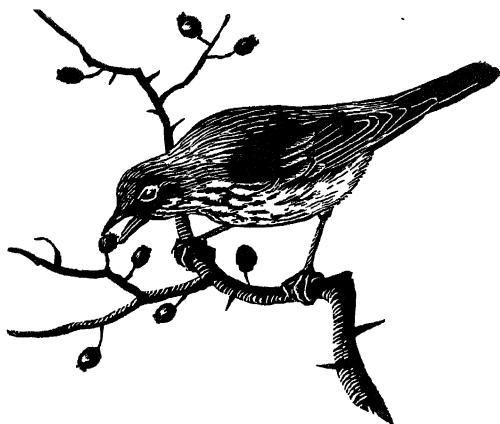
And so I came back to my own fireside and the blazing logs to find a loving wife knitting in the arm chair. Simple pleasures these, but the only pleasures worth while in life.

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There is a most beautiful woodland stretch within two miles of my house and the gracious lady owner has given me permission to wander there with my gun whenever I wish. She little knows what delight she has given me. Horse chestnut, oaks, ash, and elm, crown a steep hill which goes by the name of the Devil's Staircase. Years ago it was a good game preserve, now it is an untamed but lovely wilderness such as I delight in. No glowering keeper will meet me as I climb the bracken leaf-strewn bank. Grey squirrels will leap away through the fern and peep at me round the big boles of the noble trees. And at twilight, later on, I shall have to tell of some good nights with the pigeon flocks. At one spot the trees have been felled and nothing now remains but acres of dead and dying willow-herb and bramble.

There should be rabbits in that underwood, and when the leaves are all off the bushes, Sparkie and I will have some happy hours after these cottontails. Soft green moss grows under the big trees. In April, bluebells transform the Devil's Staircase, but there is nothing to show now in these late October days. I shall not be surprised if I spring a woodcock from the hollies (there used to be 'cock in the palmy days).

In the first summer of the present war I used to go there on Home Guard patrol, wandering alone at dead of night round the shuttered silent mansion. It was a ghostly place. But now the Army have taken it over and bugle calls float out in the grey dawn and the tramp of armed sentries sounds along the weed-grown gravel walks. Even this golden corner of October England is ready and waiting should the Hun try any tricks one foggy night.



CHAPTER IX

Winter

November 5th. The dying year

I suppose in normal times we should be letting off fire crackers and Rockets tonight, Guy Fawkes night. There will be other more deadly fireworks in some parts of this Island when darkness falls.

We have had the first really hard frost of the winter this morning. The rockery pool was frozen over and the grass and trees were crisply white. The frost did not melt until near midday. This sudden bite has stripped the ash trees.

Yester-eve they were still in full leaf, but when I went to Rugby after breakfast, I found a mass of leaves under each ash and more were falling like black rags, strewing the road. The way was banded by these leafy carpets, each carpet denoting an ash tree. But the oaks still sturdily resist the frost, many are still thick in leaf.

Tonight I went with Toby to the little ash spinney on the old glebe. This spinney is very small but has quite a character of its own. It is so insignificant that it does not rejoice in the dignity of a name, but I have always called it 'William Jones'. When I was a child a farmer of that name owned it, together with the land adjoining. It was one of those places which held my imagination. At one end of the spinney is a large red brick building, or shed, with ventilation louvres in the roof. It is obviously not a barn but an engine shed. Years ago there used to be iron-stone workings up this valley and the shed housed the engine, that same engine which I used to watch rumbling along the cutting by the forgotten lane already described. One summer day our governess took us to 'William Jones' for a picnic. It was a larger wood then, with bluebells and fine oaks. I explored

the barn and found the doors shut. But on peering through a chink I saw a sight which made my blood freeze. Hanging from a cross beam were several bloody sheep skins. Now at that time I was reading, many times over, Seton Thompson's *Wild Animals I Have Known*, and his story of Lobo, the savage wolf of the plains which ravaged the flocks and defied all efforts to capture him, was my favourite. Immediately I decided that these bloody sheep skins were some of Lobo's work. The King of the Currumpaw was surely in the vicinity!

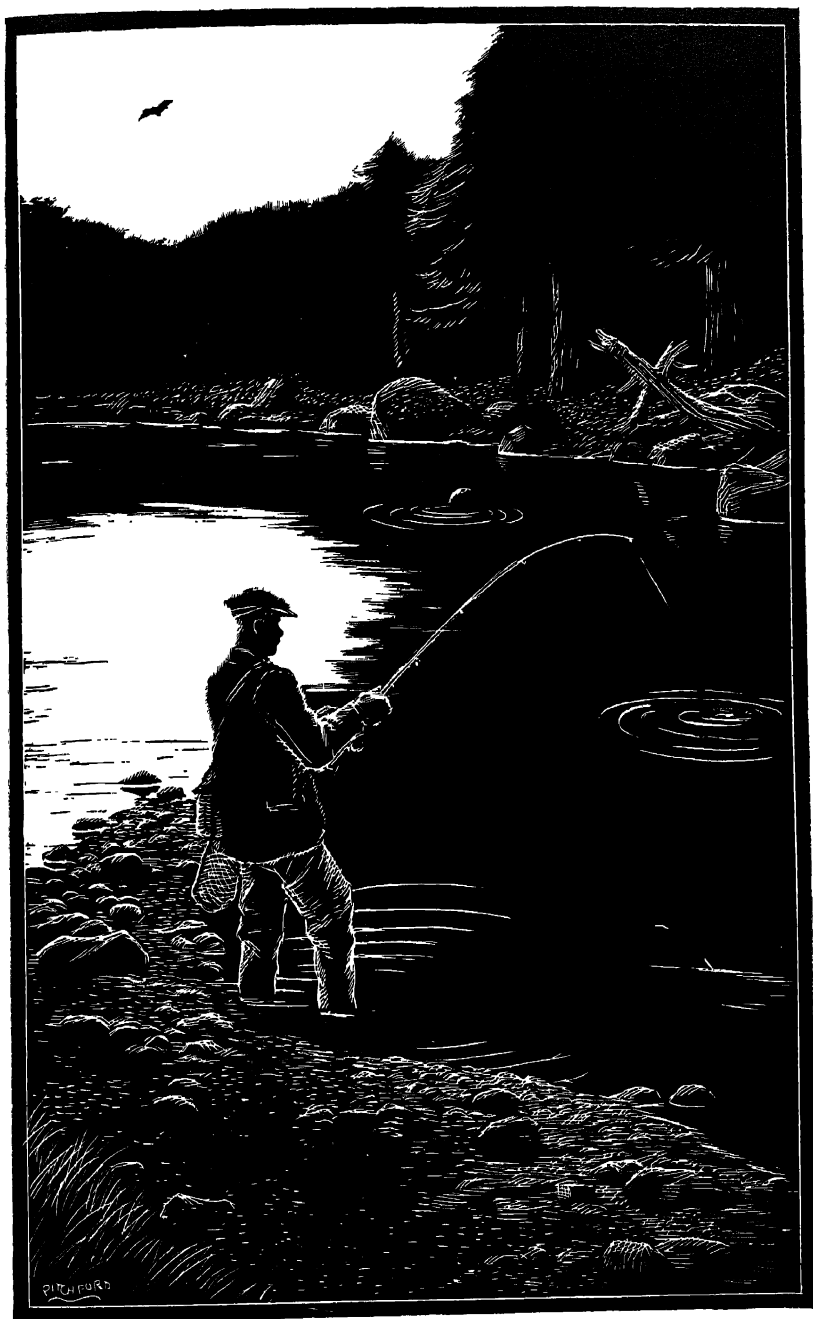
For some reason I always associated foxes with wolves. And indeed I was not far wrong. The fox is a form of wolf in our peaceful countryside, and certainly to the wild creatures, the rabbits and lambs and small four-footed things, the fox does take the place of the wolf.

When darkness falls about the fields these miniature wolves are on the prowl, ready to pounce and strike the unwary rabbit or the sickly dying lamb.

And so William Jones became an object of awe to me, filling me with unspeakable dread.

Now the wood is changed. The bluebells and the fine oaks are no more, only a few ash poles and a single oak remain. But the underwood is thick with nettles and briars, a sure find for a rabbit if one has a dog to push them out. In these autumn days wood pigeons are in the habit of coming in at roosting time and most of them go into the ash poles and the single oak, which still retains a good many leaves. Later, when all the leaves have fallen, they go elsewhere.

Toby went up to the West end by the old engine-shed, and I stood close inside the fence among the tall weeds. The evening was very quiet. Westwards a pinkish glow marked the sun's setting and Northwards a faint fog was gathering over the rim of the plough, where an occasional peewit wailed mournfully. Ten yards from me was the wire fence half hidden by rusty willow herb rods and nettles. A few yellow leaves still remained on the ash tree beside me. After a little while some partridges began to call out on the plough, and their creaking call notes rose to a crescendo as the covey took wing. Very soon I saw a single pigeon come swinging in and at my shot it fell like a plummet into the nettles behind me. And then a pretty sight rewarded me. Not far from where I stood was a briar bush covered in red berries and as I waited motionless a redwing alighted among them clucking gently. I could see its red flanks, red as if they were blood stained. It did not attempt to eat any of the berries but sat there, looking about it. And then its bright eye caught mine and with a louder cluck of alarm it flew away. It was a real winter picture; the dead grass, bleached white, the exquisite jumble of nettle and decaying willow herb, and the lone redwing sitting among the red berries. Redwing is a



Evening Rise at the Braeburn Pool



The Spirit of the Borders

poor name for this winter thrush, which comes to us from the Northlands, 'Redflank' would be better as there is no red on the actual wings.

One by one the stars came out and the shadows gathered among the ash poles. After a little while I heard Toby's whistle sounding through the quiet. It was the signal to go home.

November 7th. The Devil's Staircase

C AND I went to the Devil's Staircase after pigeon. I have already described this wood but I feel I did not do it justice. The very steep hill, cut in twain by a deep ravine, is a landmark for some miles in the flat green valley of the infant Avon. Its slopes are covered with all kinds of trees, oaks and ashes, a great many sweet chestnuts, and an occasional Scots pine.

Half way up one of the slopes of the ravine is a very fine specimen of a black poplar. In height it must be close on eighty feet. When ambushing pigeon beneath, the target seems absurdly small, a bird the size of a pigeon appearing no larger than a starling. With the miniature rifle, then, the target presented is a difficult one, and one must indeed be a good shot to be successful.

There is however another hide half way up the opposite slope of the chasm. Here alders grow thickly on the extremely steep and slippery bank and have fallen one on another forming a roof. On this roof the rotting leaves lie and even when all the leaves have dropped there is still a good cover from the sharp eyes of the pigeon flocks.

It was a fine 'rough old night' with a strong westerly wind. A ragged red sunset was gaping between leaden rain clouds. As we waited under the alder hide we could see all down the slope of the bank, in between the stems of the bushes. And very soon a grey squirrel went hurrying past, running along the ground. He saw us and sat up like a rabbit and we noticed a hazel nut in his mouth. His surprise at seeing two silent and motionless humans crouched in the shadows of that thickly wooded bank was laughable.

There was an expression of horror and incredulous surprise on his face. Then, still holding the nut firmly in his rat-like teeth, he dived away down the bank, almost tumbling over himself.

From our vantage point we could see him bounding away between the alder roots until he was lost to view. So happy he seemed in his secret woodland paths, so intent on his own little business.

Two wood pigeons then arrived in the black poplar and the rifle cracked to good effect, a grey body falling plummet wise from the topmost branches. And a little time after a vast flock came 'whispering' over, but all passed on to the far side of the hill. In retrieving my fallen bird I slipped on the red clay of the bank and rolled down, like a barrel, to the bottom.

I finally brought up in a jumble of dead leaves and twigs, covered with red clay and with my neck full of earth and sticks.

The accumulated dead wood of many autumns lies at the foot of the miniature valley; there is enough fuel here to keep the village in firewood for a whole winter.

I have great hopes of the Devil's Staircase later on. I should shoot a goodly number of pigeons from the alder hide and rabbit burrows are everywhere, though I did not so much as see the glimpse of a white scut.

November 14th. The onset of winter

THE onset of winter might very well be compared with the tide of the sea. In earlier notes I have used this simile in writing of the coming of spring, but it is more applicable in this case, for the spring advances steadily, day by day, but the winter seems to advance and then recede, like the tide.

Since the 29th of October, when I saw the fieldfares and the last swallow, the weather had been mild and open, with only an occasional snap of frost. But now it is cold again and foggy, every night we have a frost. Only the oaks show leaves, nearly all the other trees are stripped to their bare bones. But the larch in my garden have turned that glorious tender yellow which vies with the field maple for the most exquisite autumn tint. To see a larch wood in late autumn is a great source of delight, every tree seems to be illuminated by a hidden sun. And in the spring a larch wood is equally attractive, no green is so tender, so magical.

November 15th. Hodson's Spinney

I PAID my first visit of the present season to Hodson's Spinney. Last time I was here it was April and the leaves were just unfolding.

I arrived at the wood soon after four-thirty and a more typical November afternoon would be hard to imagine. A mournful fog cloaked the surrounding countryside and the 'drip drip' of moisture could be heard in the humid quiet. Being of oak, the spinney was still thick in leaf, only a few ash trees showed their naked branches.

I had quite a difficulty to find my hide, for the underwood has grown up considerably since last I was there. But at length I came upon it, a little flattened and bleached, and lo! and behold! a blackbird had built its nest in one side of it, among the twisted branches of blackthorn which I had woven into a wall.

It was tilted sideways and full of leaves and berries. Among the bronzed oak leaves at my feet I found several cartridge cases, washed to a pale pink by the rain and weather. How sweet the wood smelt! a delicious spicy

leaf-mould perfume which I always find enjoyable. After repairing the hide I settled down to wait, hearing nothing but the rustle and patter of the drops on twig and leaf. And then I heard the whisper of many wings and here came the pigeon flocks, streaming overhead, to alight in the one tall ash at the far end of the spinney. I waited a while and then stole forwards. Dusk was already falling. I slipped from bole to bole, Red Indian-wise, until I reached an open space between the trees. Nearer I dare not go. There was nothing for it but to take a sitting shot, though the range was a good eighty yards.

I could see the ash tree as a pale silver silhouette without shadow, and clustered in the crown of it quite sixty puffed balls of feather. The pigeons, magnified by the fog, seemed as large as barn-door fowls.

I took my shot and two birds fell. There was nothing sporting in it but it meant meat. In the dripping silent dusk the report of the gun was calamitous, the echoes rolled and tossed across the surrounding parkland and grumbled away in muffled volleyings. Having gathered my birds I retraced my steps to the hide. And then the pigeons began to tumble into the spinney. Perhaps my shot had put them out of adjacent plantations. They swept overhead and two barrels brought down a brace, good sporting shots taken as they passed a gap in the oaks. They were still coming in when it was too dark to shoot, I could hear their soft wings blundering among the leaves.

November 16th. House sparrows nesting in trees

HOUSE sparrows have a curious habit of building in trees. I noticed quite a 'sparrowry' today in the tops of some little plane trees which bordered a road outside Kettering. One tree was thick with untidy bundles of dead grass and straw. But on the whole it may be said that birds prefer living with human beings. In towns swifts are common, even in the heart of a great city one may see them flying about above the chimneys. This shows that birds are kindly disposed towards us. They love company and bustle and the noise of traffic.

Later in the day I took the dogs down Sperrywell Lane and a more sorry afternoon would be hard to imagine, though I enjoyed the sombre landscape which was showing the first pinch of winter. I was aware that the time of bare hedges, glooming woods, and sodden fields, had come again. Flocks of fieldfare passed over, clucking one to another. It was this lowering climate which drove the Roman conquerors to despair, and made them sigh for the sunny skies of Italy. Numerous pigeon, newly in, clattered out of the buff oaks. As I walked along I could not help recalling the soft evenings in summer when Cecily and I used to walk up this lane and smelt the wild honeysuckle in the hedges.

November 17th. Mice

THE mice are beginning to come into the house. This evening our little maid announced that one was behind the kitchen dresser.

It is curious how mice seem to terrify most women. There is an instinctive fear which is hard to explain, unless women are more imaginative than men. I took my air pistol and managed to shoot it.

Some years ago a friend and I journeyed down to an inn on the East Coast where we spent a week shooting wild geese. It was in the parlour of that rustic pub that we heard the announcer's voice telling the world that 'His Majesty's life is passing peacefully to its close'. Even the hum of the bar was hushed, and people spoke in half-whispers; as they must have done all over Britain, that dreary January night. I remember the little room so well, with its cosy fire and Lawson Wood colour prints adorning the walls. Desmond Phayre (now a Major in India) drew a most amusing picture of ourselves in wildfowling get-up, pursuing the elusive geese. The picture still hangs in that tap-room, proudly framed by our host.

Our bedroom was ramshackle, though clean, but it was infested with mice. This ancient hostelry was next door to a granary and every night, when the light was doused, the mice began their nocturnal gambollings. Sleep we found was well-nigh impossible. These mice seemed to indulge in a nightly fifty-a-side rugger match, and it was the last straw when one ran over Desmond's face as he lay in bed.

We decided something must be done. Next morning we purchased large quantities of rat poison and applied the same, liberally, to buttered squares of bread, which we placed at appropriate intervals round the skirting boards. As soon as the light was put out that night the rugger match began, and at half-time the opposing sides could be heard partaking largely of the refreshment provided. And then, after the excited cheeps and scrabbings continued for a while, we were aware of greatly subdued scufflings and squeaks, which grew fainter and ever fainter. At last all was silent and for the rest of our stay there we had peaceful nights.

Looking back on those early days of wildfowling with Desmond brings back happy memories. I can recall the early morning drives to the marshes when everything was crisp and sparkling in the headlamps of the car, and the disembarkation on the sea wall while yet the remote stars shone frostily above the horizon.

We saw more geese there than I have ever seen anywhere in Britain. As dawn broke skein after skein would rise from the sandbanks and go clamouring inland to their feeding grounds. Thousands of geese were sometimes in the air at one time and the sound was indescribable.

It was on those marshes I shot my first goose, always a red letter day in the annals of the wildfowler. I fear those times have gone for ever, all the

marshes are now Air Force ranges and I cannot believe the geese still frequent the place, at any rate, not in the prodigious numbers which we saw before the war.

November 21st. Hodson's again

I PAID another visit to Hodson's Spinney, though the weather was different from the other day. Then the countryside was wrapped in silver fog. But this afternoon I arrived in a blaze of yellow sunlight, almost painful in its intensity. Earlier it had rained heavily but soon after four o'clock the clouds rolled westwards and the lowering sun broke forth, the level rays setting every bush and grass blade a-twinkle and flashing from the puddles which lay between the plough furrows.

When I saw the wood I realized that the main pigeon flocks had 'beaten me to it'. They were already 'in', and truly, they presented a remarkable sight. Every bare branch of the ash tree was loaded, the birds seemed like grey beads strung on a string, and the low sun was shining on their pinkish breasts. I have seen a picture of flying foxes or giant bats grouped on a tree in the tropics. The sight of these hundreds of dark blobs arranged along the bare ash branches recalled that tropical scene.

As I plodded along the sticky headland towards the wood I saw other birds gliding in from the surrounding fields, wheeling and turning with rigid outspread wings, the sunlight shining on them.

By keeping low behind the quickset thorn hedge which bordered the plough I was able to enter the wood at the far end without putting up this immense gathering, and I was rewarded for my patience by bagging a right and left at a flock which wheeled over my head to join the others. As soon as I had 'shot off' the whole flock of birds arose with a thunder of wings. Had they been sea gulls, or rooks and daws, they would have added their own voices to the babel, but the pigeon is a very silent bird and even when he sings he is not vociferous. It is strange why this should be so. A jay or blackbird, if surprised, will utter an alarm note, but this soft grey bird is dumb.

Contrary to my expectations no other birds came back. I had expected to have at least a couple more in the bag. But the reason was, no doubt, that the birds were newly in, or were perhaps wandering about the country and had not yet settled down into more or less permanent winter quarters.

As I returned to the car I was rewarded with a very beautiful picture. The quiet evening sky was pale green and pinkish lemon, and against it was outlined a peculiarly graceful ash tree. It was quite bare and every branch was clear cut against its exquisite background. And as I stood there admiring it and noting its colour, which was deep olive black, very many

rooks and daws appearing, flying over my head from the direction of the sunset.

For seven minutes they passed over, all talking very excitedly, in one long continuous stream, the jackdaws bugling to the rooks, the latter answering in gruffer voices.

The light was now going so fast it was not easy to see the black birds which flowed overhead in one continuous ribbon, but still I could make out their wings. Then came two solitary rooks flying together, the rear guard. I could see them turning their heads from side to side, and hear their quiet conversation. What were they speaking of? was their talk of the day's work or the day's end, the weather, or wireworms?

None of these things. I knew they were making contented sounds to each other; it was not 'intelligent' language they were speaking, unless you like to 'make believe'.

When a bird or animal is content it makes a certain sound, just as it does when it is frightened or anxious. That in itself is a simple language of a sort, quite enough for their limited needs at any rate.

I watched these twain wing from me into the dusky night, and turned again to scan the western sky against which even the ash was now so nearly invisible. And from the ditch at my feet arose a sweet rare perfume of sodden leaves and damp grass. Over the dim half-seen elms the stars trembled, the last light drained away.

November 23rd. A Hooded crow

FEEDING with a flock of rooks in a meadow near Sperrywell Lane, was a hoodie crow, the first I have seen in this country for a very long while. It waddled along the furrows, the sun shining on its ash grey hood and black body. When the other rooks took wing it went with them and once in the sky it was hardly to be recognised as a different species. This bird must have been a straggler passing across from coast to coast. Perhaps the nearby lake attracted it for they frequently haunt water. On the Wash they are always to be seen, during the winter months, hunting the tide lines. I have seen a variety of this species on the Baltic coast, though it was a larger crow, and the hood was the colour of a biscuit.

Yesterday I took the dogs to Wildwood. Most of the leaves are off the trees now and there is less thick undercover. Sparkie worked the privet towards me (cunning little bitch) and I knocked over three rabbits as they darted past an open space close to the edge of the water. There was a fallen tree at that spot, a willow, moss grown, and along this every rabbit ran. It must have been a regular bolt way. Had I been on form I should have shot double the number, for at least seven rabbits came along the tree, all driven there by the hunting spaniel. We next tried the wood itself and an

exciting time followed; rabbits came bolting out from under the black-thorn in every direction. I do not think I ever shot so badly in all my life for I never hit one of them!

But two pigeons found their way into the game bag ere we packed up, and though I had shot so badly, we came home laden with good meat. Lately I have acquired a stubby little .22 American rifle, a Mossberg, which has taken my fancy a good deal. It is very accurate and nice to handle and is fitted with a peep-sight and sling.

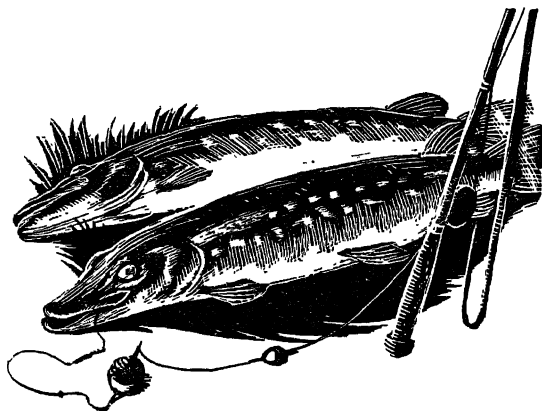
In appearance it is not unlike that beautifully designed rifle the SMLE and it handles quite as well. Rifle shooting is so different from shot gun shooting that it is said that few people are a good shot with both weapons. I think perhaps that this is true, as the good gun shot does not dwell on his aim, but pulls the trigger more by intuition, and guess work. The good gun shot must be able to gauge distance and speed and develop a good 'swing', whereas the rifleman takes a deliberate aim.

November 24th. The song thrush

A THRUSH was singing this evening as I walked across Rugby Close. Its notes aroused an odd sensation in my mind, an almost 'ill' feeling, as though for a split second I did not know where I was.

Just three or four bars . . . it was enough. The air was balmy, behind the trees across Big Side the sky was flecked with pink . . . was it February or November? That hesitating song belongs, not to this aged month, but to the lengthening twilights, when we are looking forward to spring and to all the promise of another English summer.

That thrush! . . . one might as well sing Good King Wenceslaus on Midsummer's eve!



CHAPTER X

Winter

December 2nd. Piking in the fog

The first fog of winter! Grey old November passed and gone at last! (he seemed a long time a-dying) and now—a world of fog and sombre shadow. The most ordinary familiar scenes are changed, most magically.

Even my little garden, with its bare birches, is mysterious. The rockery pool is agitated by large drops falling from the trees and the big sycamore. Blackbirds, hunting for worms in the dewy grass, seem as large as pheasants, and visibility is limited to thirty yards, sometimes to less. In such weather and on such a day I had a 'phone call from Dick to try for a pike. We have angled for pike together every winter since we were boys. Now he is a Major in the Forces.

So, later in the morning, I found myself waiting for him by the side of the lake. From behind the row of alders some mallard arose quacking, to be instantly lost in the fog which lay thickly on every hand. The still water under the alders was constantly agitated by the falling drops. The air smelt of winter. I climbed the iron railings of the park (memories of golden autumn afternoons in the long ago) and soon I saw the dim grey silhouette of the boat house looming up before me. Somewhere behind the Hall I heard rooks cawing ceaselessly. The fog unnerved them.

It was a grand day for pike, just the kind of weather they like. I have caught most of my best fish in foggy weather.

The atmosphere was so thick I could not see the opposite shore, though at this spot the lake is not more than fifty yards across. I revelled in this mysterious day, at the unreal appearance of everything, and I enjoyed the musty smell of the fog. At last through the opaque whiteness a figure was

seen, a large square figure, burdened with rods and bait can. It was Dick, a fragrant briar between his teeth.

Not so long ago he was 'through Dunkirk'. He got away, bemoaning the loss of a sack of tobacco he had to leave behind him.

Now he is back again by this misty lake, back in his old haunts. In his can were fifteen silver roach. In a few minutes our big white floats were sent spinning out, to land with a loud 'plop' just on the limit of vision, and we settled down to wait.

Two ghostly swans came out of the mist, gliding noiselessly by, to be lost again. Then there was a splash. Dick's float had vanished! He gripped the rod, I saw the tip swing back and then there was a jerk, as the movement was arrested by a bulky weight far down. The pike was hooked!

It was not long before the water was churning just beyond the reeds and a fine fish of three and a half pounds was lying on the bank. I visualized 'Pike cakes' (the way Cecily cooks them) dusted with toast crumbs, and fried to a golden brown! Some people do not eat pike, they say they are 'muddy'. I wish they could taste these pike cakes!

We had no other fish and I did not have a run. Dick 'packed up' at four o'clock and I stayed on in the hope my luck would turn. The dusk came quickly and whistling pinions sounded as a team of mallard flew past. I could not see them, but I heard them land with a splash beyond the alders. Blackbirds began to chink in the unseen shrubberies below the Hall and soon the swans came past again, drifting now with intucked bills, seemingly asleep. From the keeper's lodge a dog began to bark behind the foggy grill of its kennel.

Ten years ago there were pike in the pool. And then a visiting angler (so the story goes) slyly introduced a few small jack. The lake was teeming with roach and in a very short while the pike grew and bred. Now there are some heavy fish. Some perch were put in about the same time, really big fish, but curiously enough, few of these have been caught. It is doubtful if the pike ate them, for the perch weighed nearly a pound apiece and the pikelings were only a few inches long.

December 5th. An unidentified animal

WHILST ambushing for pigeon in Hodson's I had an interesting experience. At 4 p.m. I reached the wood with a bundle of evergreens, with which I repaired my hide among the blackthorn. This took me some time. It was a perfectly still evening, mild and soft. When I had finished the job I loaded my rifle and settled down to wait. After about twenty minutes, my eyes, roving over the tall ash in front of me, caught a movement near the top of the tree, about forty feet from the ground. It was a small animal and

for a moment I took it to be a grey squirrel. But after a little while the beast showed himself my side of the tree, and I was immediately struck by the reddish tint of its fur. I then thought it might be a red squirrel, though they are excessively rare in this part of the country, but the body was too long and slender for a squirrel's. There was a large bracket fungus protruding from the tree bole and on this the animal sat, raising its head and looking about it. I then saw that the chest was sulphur yellow! I raised the rifle, but it must have caught the movement for the next instant it vanished and I did not see it again. Could this beast have been a pine marten? In size it was as large as a grey squirrel. It might have been a stoat, but it is extremely unlikely that a stoat would climb so high, though I have seen them in low thorn bushes.

Last week a friend told me the familiar 'stoat story'. A stoat appeared on the lawn in front of his house and began to whirl about and turn somersaults to attract a pair of wagtails which were feeding nearby. The ruse was successful. One of the wagtails, overcome with curiosity, ventured too near, and the animal seized it. That stoats *do* 'waltz' to attract birds has been proved. I myself have seen this happen. One day I noticed a great commotion among some jackdaws and on going to investigate I saw a ring of them gathered round a stoat which was rolling about in the grass. But the 'jackies' were too wily to be deceived and when at last the stoat made a run at one of them they all flew away. W. H. Hudson also witnessed this same trick.

The ducks are beginning to come to the barley stubbles on some high land behind the village. During the hours of dark I have heard them quacking and flying about, but so far I have not had a chance at them.

December 7th. A Gun Accident

A BITTER afternoon with icy rainstorms. I shot six rabbits on the glebe. Coming back, as I was climbing the iron fence by the lower paddock, my foot slipped and I fell, the whole weight of my body coming on the comb of my gun stock. It snapped off short, stripping every vestige of wood from the locks. This is serious as in a few weeks time I had planned to go North on a goose hunt. Added to this, repairs to guns are now well nigh impossible, and I shall be lucky if I can get it done in time.

December 14th. Hares

A SHOOT in an adjoining county which I occasionally walk over is devoid of hares. Why this should be is difficult to say as there is a good deal of high ground and pasture which one would have thought would attract them.

I was therefore amazed this afternoon to put up two, one from under a hedge bordering a stubble field and another from fallow land. The only

explanation I can think of is that now there is so much plough the hares are attracted from adjoining 'hare country'. Some sportsmen will not shoot a hare. This is quite understandable where beagling is carried on to any extent, and anyone who has ever done beagling dislikes shooting hares, and to them it seems as great a crime as killing foxes.

However that may be, now it is wartime I am afraid I was of this frame of mind this afternoon, and the first hare that jumped up was rolled over at thirty yards range.

By a great stroke of luck I have had my gunstock repaired, though it cost me a 'fiver'. And the new stock is of better wood than the old and the grain more handsome.

December 16th. The Devil's Staircase again

WENT with C to shoot pigeons at the Devil's Staircase. We arrived at the avenue at four o'clock, just in time to see a very large red sun going down behind the trees. The grass was crisp with frost and in the gateway to Field Close ice was forming on some cattle pocks. To our amazement, when we looked at the bristly hump of the wood, we saw the oaks fairly loaded with pigeon, a mass of grey bodies on every tree top. Fully a thousand birds must have been gathered together. We soon got under cover and made our way to the 'alder' hide, sending the whole mass of pigeon whispering away. Between the boles of the trees and the tangled bare branches I could see the orange light of the setting sun lighting up the oak tree tops in a brilliant golden glow. As it slowly faded the pigeon began to wheel round. A large party of them alighted in the crown of a high elm tree in the distance where they sat facing the sunset. Curiously enough, I always shoot extremely badly in this particular wood. Whether it is that I misjudge the range (being on a slope the birds appear lower than they really are) or whether it is I have an inferiority complex I do not know; but the fact remains. I had at least seven shots, one after the other, and never touched a bird! One interesting thing happened. The whole flock was passing high overhead when every bird seemed suddenly to go quite mad. They hurled themselves down twirling about this way and that, like so many tame pigeons, every bird with its wings closed tightly to its side. I have never seen wild wood pigeons do this before.

Another interesting thing was a jay which came up into the black poplar close by, and began to imitate other birds and domestic animals, exactly like a starling. It bleated like a sheep and chirped and whistled in a most curious manner. This is the first instance I have met of a jay singing. I see no reference to the jay's power of imitation in any bird book and even the excellent 'Handbook of British Birds' recently published (Witherby) does not mention it.

Song thrushes are singing now in the early mornings, and in the evenings too. This morning I stood in my garden at 8.30 a.m. and listened to three mistle thrushes singing in the spinney beyond the meadow. The dawn was coming up silver and gold and against the bare elms seemed very 'winter bitten' and stark. The air was crisp and keen and there was frost on the grass. Yet we have had no real winter weather so far.

A beautiful grey wagtail visited the pool today and I was impressed by its green rump and dark wings. Immense flocks of bramblings haunt the beech avenue; we shall have hard weather before long. I have just been reading St. John's 'Wild Sports of the Highlands' once again. His was the ideal life for a sportsman, and he was fortunate in being able to spend his best years in one of the finest parts of Scotland. It has always been my ambition to own a little shooting box somewhere in the North and if ever I can afford it I shall try and realize this aspiration. There are many good writers on sport; my favourites being Hesketh Prichard, Millais, Abel Chapman and Zelous. St. John has the happy knack of describing his wanderings among the hills and his word pictures are full of colour. But when he describes his shooting of ospreys and other fine rare birds I cannot like him so well. In his day the osprey was by no means common, it was fast becoming a rare bird, even in the remote parts of the Highlands, and I fear he did much to complete the final extinction of this noble plumed fisher.

Christmas Eve, 1941

I AWOKE with a start. The telephone was ringing. Somehow the sound had woven itself into the fabric of my dreams.

'Yes . . . yes . . . who is there?'

'Guard Room speaking. Plane crashed at — Burning . . . Yes Sir, fair lights up the sky, you can see the glow from here!'

I dressed hurriedly. In the moist darkness I found a sergeant and a squad of men, steel helmets gleamed dully in the shaded light of the guard room. I got out my car and set off.

Eastwards there was a great glow in the sky, a jumping glow which was reflected on the low clouds. In the darkness it was hard to see where the plane had crashed. The sergeant thought it must be by Willocks' farm, I thought it was farther on; it is difficult to judge these things. So the sergeant and his men stumbled off down the farm track and I went on down the road intending to take a left-hand fork at the next village. On the way I picked up a Regular officer and three men.

When we reached the turn I saw the sky in front grow brighter and a minute or two later a vivid spot showed between bare oak branches. Out in a little meadow was a monster bonfire of white light, against which

moved fantastic black figures. The fierce glare seemed to intensify the encircling darkness. In the heart of the great fire, whitey-blue flames spurted and shot sparks far out into the meadow. The black figures ran and ducked. No sign of life could be seen in that blazing inferno, only twisted girders and red hot metal. The fabric of the wings was burning in tattered points of light string on white-hot ribs. No, if there had been men in that hell they would be cinders by now. We could do nothing. Any moment I expected the stunning roar of a bomb.

But luckily for us that plane had dropped its load on far away Germany, only machine gun bullets popped off now and then in a fusillade, like fire crackers.

The plane had evidently made a forced landing. It had hit a hedge, ploughed through, and caught fire.

'I sees him coming past the Lodge . . . one engine afire . . . knew there was summat wrong. Poor devils' . . .

I posted the sentries and reported to a Regular officer who was sending a relief guard as soon as he could.

Next morning I visited the scene again. The fire was out now. In the light of day the field seemed half the size. Policemen were walking about in the still smouldering wreckage and with them a Scotch sergeant and four Regulars.

The sergeant came back across the field. He looked faintly sick.

'We've found fourr of them . . . only puir wee bodies . . . not ours, no, not ours . . . engine trouble it must have been.'

A farmer drove across the field towing a wooden trailer behind his Ford. It came jolting across the uneven ground. In the trailer was a sack.

December 29th. A great wild goose chase

Wildfowling G.H.Q.

Well, after many weary hours of travel, I have reached my wildfowling G.H.Q. The following hasty notes will be a day-to-day account of operations and will only be of interest to shooting men.

One word as to the journey up. I stood all the way, as every carriage was packed and I reached — at midnight and had to wait some time for a taxi. Then began the moonlit drive.

It was a frosty clear night, as light as day, with the shadows from the trees banding the road ahead. We pulled up at G.H.Q. at 1.30 a.m. I had started on my journey exactly fourteen hours earlier! Now for three weeks, three whole weeks, of wildfowling!

Sitting here by the fire I wonder what those weeks hold in store for me, what sport shall I have, how many geese (if any) shall I manage to bring to

bag? for it is only geese I shall be after, other lesser fowl will be incidental. For the whole year I have looked forward to this. Each day I shall see geese and most days I shall probably get a shot or two. S.S. joins me tomorrow, if snow does not hold him up, for he has to get across from the Western Highlands and at this time of year the passes through the mountains are sometimes blocked for weeks. I have my old single eight bore and about forty rounds of BB and AA shot and a few number fours from last year. In addition I have my Magnum twelve and fifty rounds (three inch cases AA and BB).

The account of these three weeks will be in diary form.

December 30th. The first day

I DID not go out on flight at dawn this morning. Besides, I had to collect my two-stroke from the little wayside station whither I had sent it ten days ago to await my arrival. I found it, badly knocked about in transit, but still in running order. But the damage required repair so I had to take it into L——h where I got it fixed up.

It was late afternoon before I was able to get down to the shore for a spy at the fowl. I found a dreadful thing had happened. The place where I had shot most of my geese in the past was unrecognizable for H.M. Government have taken it over! Nissen huts have sprung up everywhere, right on the favourite goose grounds where the skeins used to come into feed! So I went higher up the coast to another spot and here found the geese at last. The tide was at the full and crawling up behind a hedge I saw a gaggle of about fifty 'greys' had swum into the reeds by Smith's Post. They were unstalkable, though I *did* make a half-hearted attempt to worm my way down the bank. But I was not taking it seriously, the object of my afternoon was to see where the geese were, or, in fowlers' parlance, 'working'.

S.S. arrived two hours late and I met him at the station. He had had a pretty good journey as there was no snow on the pass and he had got through without difficulty.

December 31st. Second Day

OUT on dawn flight. S.S. went to Smith's Post, I tried Smith's Corner. A few geese went inland at daybreak but neither of us got a shot and the big lots which I had seen yesterday were not in evidence.

The day was sunny and warm, though frosty at dawn. My first shot came late in the afternoon at Smith's Corner. A pinkfoot came in off the sea, very high, directly over me, I gave him both barrels from the Magnum, number three shot, and he set his wings and crashed in the high reeds back from Smith's Post. I had no dog and so of course I could not

find him, which was bitterly disappointing. There was no doubt about him being a dead bird.

January 1st. Third Day

A BLANK flight this morning for both of us. In the afternoon I went again to Smith's Corner and S.S. to Smith's Post.

At high water I saw a line of greys swimming down close inshore for Smith's Post and a little later I heard S.S. shooting off a lot. Just before evening flight I left my hide and walked down the wall to see S.S. coming out to meet me. His bag seemed to be bulging.

The following dialogue ensued.

Myself. 'Any luck?'

S.S. 'Yes.'

Self. 'What?'

S.S. 'Two greys!'

Self. 'Rot!'

S.S. slung his bag round and there, sticking out of it, I saw the white and grey sterns of two fat greylags. I could not believe my eyes!

It appeared that he had gone up to Smith's Post just before high water and had got into ambush. As the tide flooded the greys swam slowly in to the short reeds. At first they were a long way off but he waited without moving, hidden in the reeds, and the greys at last walked ashore about a hundred yards away. He made a very difficult stalk through wet marsh and gave them both barrels from his twelve bore as they rose. He knocked two down and wing-tipped a third, which got away over a gutter. The shots I heard were from S.S. vainly trying to stop this wounded goose, which was not hurt, save for its damaged flight feathers. With luck he should have had three geese.

He was naturally delighted at this great beginning and I was pleased too. Early success spurs one to greater effort. I have had three weeks on this coast and not bagged a goose. To get a right and left on the third day was good fortune indeed. They were fine fat geese; both old birds. After this episode we went our divers ways for the evening flight. I tried the Long Breakwater, but though the ducks came in at dusk, they were all too high.

January 2nd. Fourth Day

To Smith's Corner again. A blank flight, though I could have shot a mallard (or perhaps two), for as day was breaking a couple came up the gutter past my hide, the drake making a great deal of noise. I did not shoot at them for fear of disturbing some greys which were in the vicinity.

A few skeins of pinks came off the sea just as the moon rose but they were out of our line, passing between S.S. and myself. Just before dark, as I

stood in the tall reeds with my gun over my arm, a magnificent hen harrier sailed right over my head, as grey as a pigeon. It saw me and checked in the wind not ten yards high, a lovely sight. I hope no marauding gunner will shoot it, the keeper has promised to leave it alone, and I hope he does so, for this hawk is a rarity, even here, and is the first I have seen.

January 3rd. Fifth Day

As I lay in the reeds at Smith's Corner again at dawn I saw seven greylags walk out from the short grass and go out on the muds. They trooped along in line like soldiers. I tried a stalk but the sentry saw me and they all went to sea. Nothing on evening flight. Nearly a week has passed and no goose yet for me!

January 4th. Sixth Day

BEING in want of meat and deciding the geese could do with a rest we went to Curlew Bay and hid in the whins. S.S. shot a brace of curlew and I had one.

January 5th. The Sawbath

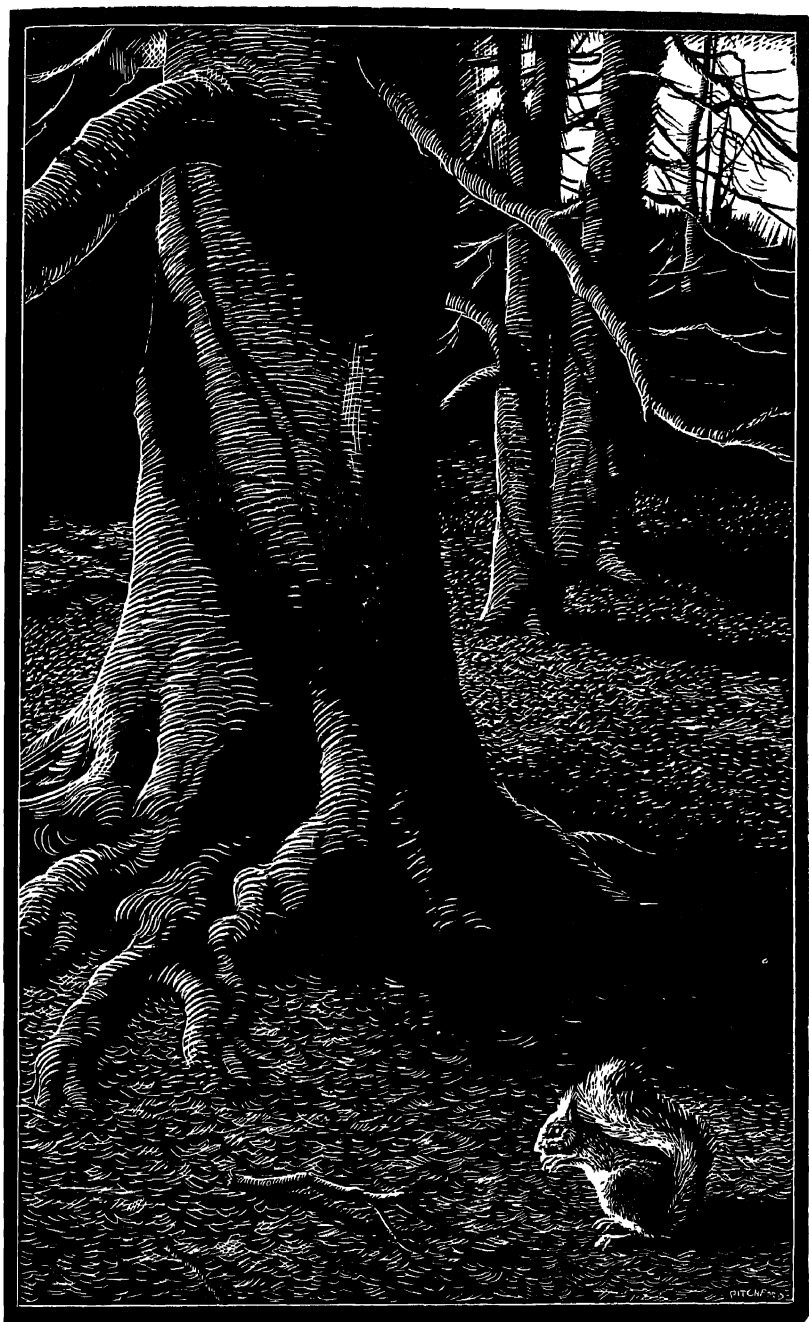
WALKED all round the coast from Curlew Bay to Leaning Buoy spying fowl (of course without guns). A stiff wind blowing and plenty of geese beating up at high water.

January 6th. Eighth Day

At last my luck has turned. We did not go out on morning flight but set off after an early breakfast. S.S. went to his beloved Smith's Post, I determined to work the lower beat below the Keeper's hut.

It was a beautiful sunny day, 'butterfly weather', hardly the kind of climate one associates with goose hunting! I fear that this mild spell is the cause of our ill success. However I got into an old pigeon hide on the borders of a field of young wheat. Odd greys sometimes have a liking for dropping in on a sunny day such as this for a taste of green wheat.

I sat outside the hide and eventually moved down the bank to eat my lunch under an oak tree. Dead leaves lay around on the grass and I thought what a pleasant shady place this would be in summer. A robin came and peeped at me round a bush and I threw it some crumbs. I had just finished my 'piece' when I heard the croak of a greylag and looking up saw six geese come in over the trees. After circling the wheat they dropped in on the other side, not far from a burn. I knew this burn well, as in the past I have ambushed the greys there, in the 'good old days' before the war.



Autumn in the Woods

I immediately decided to try a stalk. It seemed pretty hopeless, but worth the chance. So I took off most of my heavy gear and began a long walk round the foot of the bank until I came to the burn, where it ran into the sea.

I followed up its course for half a mile, keeping well below the level of the top of the bank, and at last came to a spot which I judged was opposite the geese, if they were still there. My stalk had taken quite half-an-hour and it was quite possible the greys had gone in that time.

I crawled up the bank behind a thorn bush and scanned the wheat. At first I saw nothing and thought they had indeed departed. Then I was suddenly aware of a 'grey' about a hundred yards farther down the field. It had its back to me and was looking the other way. I did not wait to investigate further but scrambled along the burn bed until I came to a tree bole. I peeped round this and saw all six geese out in the wheat about eighty yards distant.

There was a slight rise in the ground so I wormed my way on my stomach until I was behind it and was just preparing to fire when I heard the roar of wings. They were up! No doubt the sentry had spied the top of my head. I jumped to my feet and gave the nearest goose both barrels. He dropped his paddles but went on after the others. They went over the trees and passed from sight. Cursing my luck I walked across the wheat to the bank and there, out on the muds, I saw *five* geese, standing with heads erect, and a dark object lying beside them. Was it my goose?

I set off through the reeds and then across the muds, sinking in to my calf.

The five geese had of course now flown away but I soon saw that the object was indeed my goose, stone dead, lying (or rather sitting) on the mud as if asleep, with its bill tucked into its back. A fine heavy greylag and an old bird. So whatever happens now I have shot my goose and this trip has been worth while! When I carried him back to the bank I surprised three more greys off the wheat. They had evidently come in whilst I was collecting my fallen goose.

It was fortunate it fell where it did, for lower down, the mud was too deep, though a dog could manage to get over it.

S.S. did no good at Smith's Post. Since his success there on the 1st of January he has haunted the place, but the geese are shy. We shall have to break fresh ground. The weather is all against us, though I have a feeling that it is going to change.

January 7th. Ninth Day

WE took an 'easy' first thing, and after midday went to Curlew Bay as the larder is running low. We came back with a tremendous bag of

curlew. I sent a lot of them off down South to friends, the rest we kept to provide us with meat. Curlew liver and hearts make a most appetizing breakfast.

These birds are seen out in the bay, feeding on the muds, and as soon as the tide begins to 'make' they come in by twos and threes to a rushy point by an old stone wall. I built a hide there and it was from this place the bag was made. Today's bag will keep us in meat for the rest of the trip. The sea was full of geese but not one came in. The weather continues open and summerlike.

January 8th. Tenth Day

As the sun shone with spring-like persistency I tried the wheat field again. When I got there I saw three geese already in so I stalked up the burn again and with AA shot knocked the biggest gander over at sixty yards. The others got up into the sun, otherwise my second barrel should have taken effect.

There was an excellent flight by the keeper's hut tonight. The duck came in low, but by ill luck, we were not just in the right place, as so often happens. A redshank fed up a gutter within a foot of me as I lay in the reeds and never saw me.

January 9th. Eleventh Day

At last the weather has changed. We found a hard frost at dawn flight and a great many more geese had come in during the night. Another factor is that the moon is waning and the moonless nights make for better sport as the geese do not feed at night. I have noticed lately many skeins coming off the sea after dark, we can hear them passing over and calling to one another on their way to the hills.

I tried the lower beat at dawn but did no good, though there was a big party of greys sitting well into the reeds. I made so much noise in the frozen herbage that they heard me and went to sea. On the evening flight tried the Leaning Buoy marsh. I built a hide of stone at the end of a breakwater, and had I held my gun straight I should have had a pink which came right overhead in easy range. But I was lying on my back and had to shoot 'sitting up', which is usually fatal to good marksmanship. Other geese came in over the breakwater below me but they were out of range. S.S. did no good. A lot of golden plover were on the move, and as the tide flowed, trip after trip of redshank came past.

The sunset was glorious, transforming the muds to a shell pink. I saw a lot of geese go in from the sea over the lower beat. Things look more promising. We heard a lot of pinks going in as we walked back from the marsh. S.S. shot a golden plover.

January 10th. Twelfth Day

EARLY to lower beat. Intense frost and bitterly cold. I stalked up the reeds and at dawn a lot of geese came in as the tide flowed and landed two hundred yards above me, where they sat cackling and crying in the short reeds, attracting other small parties which wheeled in to join them. But as full dawn broke all went to sea, and I could not stalk them as the frozen reeds make walking so noisy. Evening flight was extremely cold with more frost. Many snipe were seen about the springs but we did not bother with them. I saw the hen harrier again and a male bird with her, hunting the reeds. The male caught a reed bunting. S.S. had an amusing experience at Smith's Post. As it got dark a goose came in to the short reeds behind him and it was too dark to see it. When he stood up it nearly knocked off his hat as it rose!

January 11th. Thirteenth Day

THE 'Sawbath'. Scouted fowl by Bight Point and Leaning Buoy. Several skeins on the wing and two lots of pinks came over us. Weather continues very cold with some fog. Many more fowl on the move.

January 12th. Fourteenth Day

HIGH tide was round about eleven o'clock this morning. A strong gale sprang up after midday from the S.W. We went to Bight Bay. I took the single eight bore and about ten rounds of BB shot and one number 3 case. It was a strange afternoon with low cloud and bitterly cold. Now and again a gust of icy rain swept down, just the sort of weather which sets fowl on the move. Before we reached the farm I saw several skeins of pinks coming off the sea, fighting quite low in the teeth of the gale as they crossed the bank.

I saw there was no time to be lost, other parties were lifting from the sand banks. We hurried over the plough and reached the bank, S.S. went north and I turned right, along the top of the sea wall. A lot of thick thorns grew on the bank, interspersed with broom. I got down behind one of these thick broom clumps out of the icy wind. I was not a moment too soon for in a short while I saw a big skein lift from the sea and tack across towards me.

As they passed over, very high, and at least eighty or ninety yards up, I fired at the leader with the big eight bore. He went on, but his next astern folded up and fell like a plummet to the plough. It was certainly the highest shot I have ever made at a goose. It fell with terrific force on the half frozen furrows and I ran across and got him, a fine fat pink.

Other skeins came in to left and right of me. I had another lot overhead but did not repeat my first success. Nor could I expect to, for on examining

the bird I had hit, I found a single pellet of BB had gone in under the chin. That goose had been killed instantaneously.

S.S. who had been along the reed edge, came along the bank later with a fine grey. And so home after a really good day. We shall get more sport if this weather holds, rough winds and colder mornings seem to promise better things in store. I saw the male harrier again with a reed bunting in its talons.

January 13th. Fifteenth Day

WE went again to Three Trees Farm. In the half light of dawn, as I stood on top of the bank, a skein of six geese came in silently, to drop on the plough behind me, just out of shot. S.S. had a fine mallard drake by the long breakwater; several greylags circled him but he did not get a chance.

January 14th. Sixteenth Day

I WENT on morning flight to the Leaning Buoy, an intensely cold morning with frost, and not a bird on the wing. For evening flight I tried the Buoy breakwater and had two pinks over me, going inland, but failed to connect, as I fired (with the twelve bore) lying on my back.

S.S. shot a 'thin' grey by Smith's Post. Many redshanks and golden plover were feeding along the tide edge as it receded. When the water was dropping, the ice (which had floated in) rested on top of the reed spikes and as the tide fell these cakes of ice rustled down on all sides with the most extraordinary sound. There was a magnificent sunset reflected in the muds and at last light Short-eared Owls popped out of the low reeds and began quartering the ground. They evidently roost in the thick herbage during the hours of daylight, though I have never yet succeeded in putting one up. It was freezing again tonight and I saw a lovely sight. A tall hemlock stem, crusted with ice, and behind, on the bank top, a mass of red berries on which fieldfares were feeding. One amusing thing I noted. When the tide began to ebb, a large ice floe floated downstream and on it sat a large party of greylags, evidently enjoying their novel ride. Tide was high at 1.40 p.m.

January 15th. Seventeenth Day

I SHALL always remember this day. We started off early for Curlew Bay intending to replenish the larder. Neither of us were after geese. I took the twelve bore and only two three-inch cartridges loaded with number three, the rest were fives and sixes.

S.S. went off right handed for the long breakwater, I went on to the northern end of Curlew Bay. It was a bright clear morning with a heavy wind blowing from the west. When I reached the whins I saw the tide was

going to be a high one. Already it had covered the muds so I had missed the curlew flight, and, seeing this, I made up my mind to walk down the coast and connect with S.S. at evening flight. Ducks were flying all over the place, and I began to feel uneasy because it was probable that with the rising wind the geese too would be also on the move.

I walked along the foreshore, skirting the whins, jumping the narrow gullies which were choked with ice. Flock after flock of redshank arose, piping wildly, from the close green marsh grass. And then I saw the first goose skein. It was composed of a bunch of nine or ten greys and they were hugging the shore and beating up directly for me. I threw myself down behind a whin bush and fumbled with my cartridges, for I only had sixes in each barrel. By the time I had changed them the geese were almost in range, still heading for me. In another second I should have had a right and left, but whether the leader suspected the whin bush might conceal an enemy I do not know, but the skein yawed slightly, passing fifty yards out. With the big eight I should have done much damage as the birds were nicely bunched and flying against the wind. But my two barrels did nothing, only a single feather dropped from the nearest grey as they swung round and headed back towards Smith's Post.

In none of the best of tempers I now continued my way. Soon I saw the reeds and before I could gain their shelter two skeins of geese came up, passing low over them. They saw me and, like the others, turned away.

I reached the reed bed and as I did so a mallard passed on my right at forty yards. I missed clean with both barrels. There was no doubt about it, I had the jitters, and should be lucky if I got anything at all.

Then a big bunch of geese arrived, I heard them before I saw them. They passed over and again I missed with both barrels.

For a time nothing came. The tide was still making, driving me back from the reed edge to the bank. I walked slowly along below the trees, whose twisted roots protruded from the sandy slope. Green ferns, sheltered in this quiet place, peeped out from crannies in the rocks.

Then the geese began to move again. I hurried on to the long breakwater and as soon as I reached it another skein came over. Need I say I missed again?

A little later, with one cartridge left, I shot a mallard which fell out on the soft mud. I retrieved this bird with some difficulty.

There was no sign of S.S. anywhere so I set off on the long tramp home. The wind still blew but the sky was clear, throwing the stunted oaks in silhouette; my feet rang on the frosty surface of the road. An hour later I reached the village, ravenously hungry and feeling very disgusted. Had I the proper gun and cartridges, and had I been shooting well, I should have bagged at least five geese.

January 16th. Eighteenth Day

CONTRARY to expectations the wind still blew at dawn. So we went again to Three Trees Farm. But few geese were about and the flight was a blank. After breakfast I went to the Long Breakwater, S.S. to Gully Corner. As the tide rose I heard greys talking among the reeds and I made a long stalk over difficult ground to reach a little island which was in front of the main 'beds'.

The morning was grey and threatening snow. Several geese came past but all out of range. To the north of me I heard some big gaggles still chattering in the reeds and when a small skein came past me, heading up the coast, I tried a long shot with the eight. They were too far, but at the report I heard the main lot 'lift' behind me. I had hardly time to slip in another case when they swept past the reed bed, the nearest bird was directly overhead, not thirty yards up.

I chose a bird on my left and at my shot it fell with a tremendous splash in the rising tide which was now lapping my feet. I plunged in after it, as the tide and winds were taking it parallel to me. After a struggle and a wetting I managed to grab it by the neck as it floated by.

All this time the wind was rising, driving white horses into the reeds. I got back to my original hide, and had hardly done so when another skein came past me. I fired again and the goose fell, like the other, into the tide. But unfortunately this bird was a long way out. I had no dog and I could not face the rough water. It would have been suicidal. So I had to see it float away to sea, to my great sorrow. I hate losing a bird like this as it is a life wasted. But it could not be helped.

At darkling I came upon S.S. on the sea wall. I expected to see him laden with geese but he had not had a chance. On the contrary he had fallen in and was wet to the skin.

It appears he had gone to a spot we call the Goose's Graveyard, a treacherous bit of marsh surrounded by deep gullies. All the geese wounded by the punt gunners seem to go there. The tide had come up so swiftly and suddenly that he had found himself marooned with swirling cakes of foam going past him at Heaven knows how many knots an hour.

He had 'splashed' out and in the process had dropped into one of the deep gullies. The tide was running with such power that his legs were swept from under him, but as he felt himself going he clutched at the grass and pulled himself out. By sheer good fortune he managed to reach the bank and safety. High water was at 3.30 p.m.

January 17th. Nineteenth Day

WEATHER is warmer and the wind has gone.

I went again to Bight Point and got into my reed bed. At midmorning

skeins of pinks came in high and with Belching Bess I fetched one down, quite as high a shot as that of the Twelfth. It crashed in the tall reeds but I found it without much trouble.

S.S. met me at dusk with the largest grey gander I have ever seen. It appears he was standing on the bank just at darkling when a skem dropped over the trees. He picked the leader and dropped it at the foot of the sea wall. It was truly a magnificent bird and its wing span measured close on five feet.

January 18th. Twentieth Day

SNOW today and a thick fog. Walked with S.S. to Bight Point and saw a few skeins of pinks going over in the mist.

January 19th. Twenty-first Day

WITH a strong wind blowing from the N.E. I went alone to Bight Bay. S.S. betook himself again to the Goose's Graveyard, despite his wetting on the Sixteenth.

The morning was sunless and bitterly cold. When I reached the shore I saw the tide was out but a nice party of greys lifted from the short reeds and went to sea. I ambushed deep in the thick high reeds for I suspected the greys might walk in later when the tide began to flow. I lay like an old fox, watching them from ten o'clock until after midday. And then they began to walk slowly in. In another half hour they had come ashore below me and some were walking along the tide edge a hundred yards off, exactly opposite my hide.

I was getting very cramped and cold. And the tide was making. I could see the velvety mud between the reed stems begin to 'creep' with water, on all sides tiny squeaks and gurglings sounded. It was fascinating to watch the little hollows in the mud suddenly filling and brimming and the stealthy water creeping on, insinuating itself between the stalks of the tall graceful reeds.

All this time the geese were moving towards me, I think it was the most exciting moment of the whole trip. And what a wonderful picture it was to see these wild birds tearing up the root tubers, covering themselves with black mud, fighting, and running at each other with raised wings, gabbling and chattering for all they were worth!

It was a toss-up whether the geese would come within range before I was driven out, like a rat from its bolt hole, by the tide.

There was nothing for it but a sitting shot (the 'Irish Landlord' as it is called), trusting to Belching Bess and a long case of BB.

So I held high above the nearest grey back and pressed the trigger. The ensuing roar and babel was indescribable. Every goose was up and flogging

out to sea. But I saw at least one had been hit. It lay among the short stubbles stone dead. And lo! and behold! when I picked it up, I saw another one forty yards on! So Belching Bess had 'done her stuff'.

I was then driven back from the reeds to the bank where, with two fat geese in the bag and a pipe well alight, I constructed a small fire to warm myself.

The snow was falling fast and an icy blast shivered through the bare knotted branches of the oaks.

When at last the tide turned, night was not far distant. I went back to the reed bed and soon after, a skein of greys came past. I fired and got my bird but it fell in the tide and was swiftly carried away. If only I had brought my dog!

Such tragedies are not easily avoided, even by the best shots. A goose, even when mortally stricken, will sometimes 'carry on' a good way.

The snow came thickly, blotting out the sea. It was my last night. As I lingered by Bight Point a single goose came past from the fields and I missed it at forty yards. But I could not grumble. With a little more luck I should have bagged three, and with a double barrel, five, or even six.

It was quite dark when I reached the road but the snow lay thickly, giving an eerie false light long after the sun had gone. In the twisted trees the wind moaned and snow flakes gently brushed my cheek.

But the strap of the game bag cut deep into my shoulder, for I had twelve odd pounds of goose on my back. A fitting end to a memorable war-time goose hunt!



CHAPTER XI

Winter

January 27th. The beggars have come to town

The return of the frost has brought my bird friends begging at the door for food. The cold was so intense last night that a hot water bottle, lying on the floor of our bedroom, was full of ice.

Starlings, sparrows, tits and wrens, blackbirds and thrushes, finches and a', cluster about the lawn in front of the French windows, all waiting for their morning feed. Seeing them thus altogether one can see the characteristics of each individual. Some are bold and aggressive, others shy and reserved. The most retiring is the hedge-sparrow. He hops about on the fringes of the crowd and humbly tries to attract attention. As for the wrens, they are so bold that they come right inside the scullery door and hunt for spiders behind the stove. They find it warm there, too, no doubt.

At the moment I am confined to the house with a most virulent cold. It is strange that doctors have never found the cure for this wretched complaint. Thousands of people suffer the most acute discomfort every year through this foul malady. In my case taste and hearing completely vanish.

January 28th. The great cold

WENT to Tanglewood for the chance of a shot. It was an extremely bitter evening. On the open fields the ice filled every hollow, thick grey ice as hard as iron, and careful walking was needed. When dusk fell I went down by the lake. What a desolate scene! The dim white plain stretched away to the distant shore, the snow lay upon it and only in the very centre was there an open space of black ice on which were grouped a great company of wigeon and mallards. Now and again one would stretch up and flap its wings to sink again once more into immobility.

The moon was at the full, and when the last light had gone from the west, the scene was still illuminated by its pale yellow rays.

Duck began to flight out, the dark bunches of birds became smaller every moment. They all followed a line over a small plantation of larch on the crest of the opposite hill.

January 30th. Snow in the woods

SNOW! The great wood was magical under its white mantle, the rides were muffled inches deep, and against the dazzling white the underwood seemed unusually black. Toby went left, silent footed, down a ride, and I turned west along a narrow alley fringed with hazels.

I soon found a small open space between some thorns, and unslinging my game bag I put it down on the snow to make a warmer place on which to stand. Not far away was a gaunt oak, snow-crusts along its twisted branches and in the hollows of the bark. It was a fairy-like scene, calling to mind a painting by Brueghel.

Busy sat beside me, the velvet black of her coat making a charming contrast to the white background.

Very soon the pigeons began to arrive. They came thick and fast, and crash after crash told of well directed shots as the birds fell down among the bushes. At each shot Busy slipped away to return with a pigeon in her mouth. I could hear Toby shooting off in the distance, but when we at last joined company after the flight was over he had only two birds in the bag. He had dropped a good many but having no dog, in the gathering gloom he could not find them in the hazels.

The last day of January. Shepherd's hut

MORE snow fell last night and it continued all day. The wind wreathing and drifting it on the headlands, scolloping and carving its snow walls in the hedge gaps. In this weather I made my way to the shepherd's hut standing forlornly alone on the Major's field of kale. I was not sorry to climb inside and shut the door and Busy was as glad as I was, for the wind was bitter. It drove the snow flakes horizontally, and stung the face.

Once in this cosy place I took stock of the interior. The floor was strewn with straw and from a rusty nail in one corner of the hut hung a tattered overcoat. Round the walls, likewise suspended, were various rustic implements, a mattock, two billhooks and a scythe. In another corner was a gap-toothed wooden rake. Initials had been carved on the door; some shepherd perhaps, in some far away lambing time, had spent an idle hour scratching the crude letters with his clasp knife. Then I peeped over the top of the door at the snowy scene outside (there was a space of quite six inches between the top and the roof) and saw the dreary winter wastes of

snow with the tops of the greens just peeping through their frozen coverlet. This white outside world threw up a sort of reflected light on the ceiling of the hut.

Soon I saw a small object making its way laboriously through the drifts towards the hedge behind me. It was a little red mouse with a long tail. After a time he eventually reached the high snow-drift just beside me and here he was baffled by the white wall. But he turned along it and very soon found a small opening and through this he crept and gained the shadows of the bare horizontal thorn boughs which had been laid by the hedger's hook. Mice suffer a good deal in hard weather and the hunting owls wax fat whilst other birds starve.

I had hoped for some pigeons coming to the kale but not one appeared, only a few jackdaws, which perched on a hurdle within gunshot of the hut. There was some yellow straw lying on the snow just there and they flew down to investigate. After a while they flapped away and I saw nothing but the countless white crumbs of snow flying past my eyes.

February 4th. The turn of the tide

WE had more snow on the Second and after a temporary thaw it has returned. It is amazing how true that old country saying is that if you see the snow lying about in the ditches it is 'waiting for more'.

I took the dogs as far as the Piper's cottage along the 'turnpike'. The roads were like glass and on the road verge the snow squeaked under my boots. Yet for all this savage weather I felt the turning of the tide. Perhaps it was something to do with the lateness of the lingering light.

We may have more snow and frost, the running brooks may be stilled once again in the mailed fist of ice, but these things cannot hold back the spring. In a week or two now, I shall note the first real stirring, that sighing of the winter-weary earth, that promise of fresh green things and summer days beside the Folly. There is a strange romance about the very early days of Spring which is akin to that of Autumn. I sometimes think I always live, in my mind, five weeks ahead of the year. In early March I think of swallows and noisy rookeries; in that month the roads are dry for the first time, not dry with frost, but blown dry by the winds; the moisture has begun to disappear from grass, trees and bushes. I feel a longing to be up and away, the open road beckons. And though, just now, the hedges seem unusually naked and bitten, there is a redness in the twigs, a purple bloom along the hedgeside, which means the sap is stirring. Few people realize this dramatic rising of the sap. Last spring I cut a small branch from one of my birch trees. It 'bled' profusely, large clear drops of moisture, and I had to staunch the flow with a lick of paint. I do not know whether a tree can bleed to death in spring, but from the quantity of moisture

which gushed from this little birch I could well imagine that it might be possible.

February 7th. No quarter

THE hard weather persists with unabated ferocity. Winter has indeed bitten into the earth. Yesterday there were signs of a thaw but now there is snow again, it powders and crunches underfoot. On the bronze square of Wildwood pool a small boy was sitting disconsolately athwart a sledge. Behind him was the dark mass of the wood and on either hand the dazzlingly white fields. But to mock winter the first lambs appeared by the Manor Farm, all with their heads towards me, which, so the old people say, means luck for the rest of the year. And of late I have heard the first blackbirds 'recording', which shows that they too know spring is only just round the corner.

February 17th. The fangs of winter

STILL the cold continues, steadily and unyielding. Since December 29th we have had constant frost. The big lake by which I stood that hot September afternoon and watched the Clouded Yellow flying over the cabbage flowers is now one solid sheet of grey green ice, inches thick. A wagon could be driven across with perfect safety. It has been in this condition for five weeks. Once, when there was a partial thaw, it presented a strange spectacle. The upper layer of ice melted, giving the whole expanse a milky appearance. This was caused by the 'thaw water'; one could still have walked across with perfect safety, though the water would be three inches deep.

Far out in the centre of this desolate windswept plain the wildfowl huddle in a solid mass. All through the daylight hours they are there, though each day the flock seems to dwindle.

In the garden the soil has a curious dusty, bleached look, so pinched it is with frost, and all our wallflowers, planted with such care in the autumn, are mere shrivelled bundles of yellow rags. On the opposite side of the street, below the Vicarage wall, lie dirty heaps of snow. Time and again those heaps have been covered with fresh virgin snow, now they are dirty again with all the mud which is splashed from the road. Those heaps have lain thus since Christmas. And then we hear that we do not get the hard winters we had in our Great-Grandfather's days!

Had it been peacetime the lakes would be crowded with skaters, and the daily papers would probably devote front page headlines to the Great Frost.

I read of the masses of wildfowl on the East coast marshes. It is a curious coincidence that the last War winters were exceptionally severe.

I notice that the sparrows, deceived by the powdery appearance of the earth in the garden borders, attempt to take dust baths. But each tiny particle of earth is locked fast, as hard as cement.

Why do birds 'dust'? Is it to rid themselves of vermin, or do they enjoy the sensation of the minute grains running down between their feathers?

A few sad snowdrops are showing below the birch trees. Actually there was one out on Christmas Day.

The last of the wild geese has been disposed of. All of them were the best I ever tasted, probably because we hung them a long time. This we were able to do owing to the intense cold. The bones made excellent soup and the hens had the remainder.

The flavour of wild geese is distinctly 'gamey' and in appearance resembles mutton. It is not white flesh, like a chicken's.

Each goose bagged meant many hours of waiting in wet and cold and sometimes considerable skill and labour in stalking.

As the snow still lies on the ground the village children spend all their spare time tobogganing. All normal children adore snow, I do myself. In the evening it turns from paper-white to a beautiful soft violet. As for digging in the garden one might as well try to dig concrete.

February 18th. The old man passes

THE old gentleman mentioned in these notes on August 22nd has died. Perhaps that was indeed his last walk up the village street in the burning rays of the sun. I have since learnt more about him. His age was ninety-four and his life had been a very happy one. A keen rider to hounds and a first rate shot (he had a right and left at partridge when he was ninety), a shrewd and careful farmer, he was the sort of man who finds this life a good one and has no desire for any other. He was, I suppose, lucky in this respect, that his span of life covered the best and most prosperous period in our history, a time devoid of any major wars, a golden age of peace and contentment for the more well-to-do.

As he sat by his fireside in his latter years he would be able to look back on his long life.

I should imagine there would be few bitter recollections for him, no shattering bombs, misery and hatred. He would think of the rich harvests he had grown and gathered, of many a golden autumn walk after the 'little brown birds', of snowy, festive Yuletides, feasting and merriment.

And, as his son told me, he had been a good father, who had loved his children and given them encouragement and help.

I went to the Devil's Staircase tonight. Snow still lay between the tall ash poles which were uneasy in the wind. As it grew dark the rooks began

to stream across the wood from the outlying fields. These birds work late; the pigeons and other birds go to roost before sunset, but the rooks stay out in the fields until it is almost too dark to see.

February 19th. A Wintry Scene

SEEING a knot of people standing on the canal bridge I stopped my car and joined the spectators. What was the matter? had somebody fallen in? I found the scene was well worth watching. Twenty horses, attached to a barge, were roped together along the tow path. On the barge, standing upright on either side of the centre beam stood ten men, five a side, and as another man urged the straining horses forward the men rocked the craft from side to side. Such shouting and crashing of ice I never heard. But even with all this bustle and turmoil the thick ice on the canal only yielded after much effort, cracking sideways in huge thick panes, like glass. Here indeed was a winter picture, one to remember, the leaden sky, the starved snow-covered fields, the straining line of horses, and the swaying barge. It reminded me of an old Dutch painting. By rights I should have found a coach and pair well stuck in the drifts by Honey Hill. I found instead its modern counterpart, the red mail van, with the driver shovelling sand under the back wheels which buzzed round on the frozen surface.

The bargees had managed to break a jagged path for some way along the canal, but when I passed later I saw that the water was again frozen so that all their labour had been in vain.

Out on the ice of the reservoir the duck are still huddled in a black mass, from a distance they appear like a dark-coloured rug laid on the ice. Despite all this bitter weather I notice across the paddock, two stock-doves flying around the ashes with upraised wings. This is their courting flight. They glide like those paper gliders we used to make at school.



CHAPTER XII

Winter

March 5th. Signs of a thaw

When I saw the mist yesterday and heard the steady dribble of gutters I thought the thaw had come to stay. And yesterday, for the first time since before Christmas, a song thrush was singing on Rugby Close. But when we awoke this morning we found the familiar white world again; snow falling, and the birches crowded with hungry birds.

I paid a visit to the pools last week and Sparkie, routing about on the Island, put up no less than seven fat mallards. They got up on the far side of the Island, but I dodged back under the chestnut and very soon the whole team came wheeling back high overhead. One lucky shot from the choke-bore took effect on the leader and he fell on the opposite meadow.

A local farmer tells me that a week ago a flock of twenty-two wild geese pitched on one of his fields. He said they were 'grey geese' but whether they were Whitefronts or Pinks I cannot say.

It is a strange thing that every hard winter wild geese come regularly to the water meadows of the Ouse and the Avon.

March 7th. The abyss of space

I VISITED the Temple Observatory at Rugby tonight for a glimpse at the stars. I think that to look through a powerful telescope at the night sky is one of the most awe-inspiring spectacles imaginable.

No wonder the ancient astronomers donned special robes before studying the stars. Through the powerful lenses one is projected hundreds of miles above the surface of this earth, almost as if one was suspended in the observation basket of a balloon.

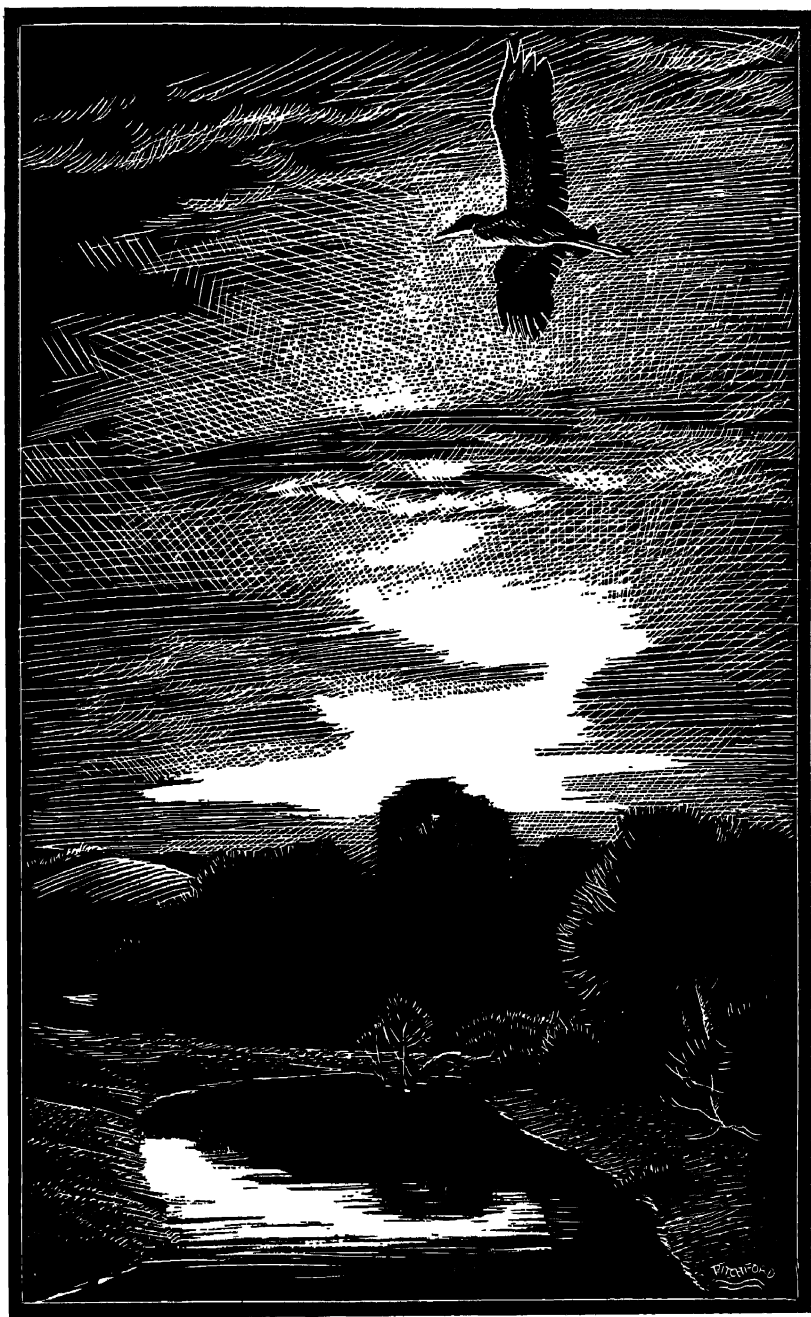
The moon appears terrifying and horrible, especially when we know that in billions of years this earth will resemble it. The dark shadows from mountain and crater are so clearly visible, the same light which illuminates that scene of appalling desolation lights our own world. But there are more staggering sights than the moon, that old worn-out corpse of a world. There is Mars, that 'live' world, the planet of mystery, with its orderly inter-connecting canals, which tap the melting snow-caps of its poles.

How can one doubt that there is life on Mars? The Martians must be a much older race than ourselves, older by several million years. Their world has passed its prime. Without water no life can exist, and in those faint thread-like lines which traverse the planet one can see the desperate struggle of its inhabitants for existence. And what a strange world it must be, featureless and perfectly flat, without mountains or hills, the limitless plains, furrowed in all directions by the great canals which, like our winterbournes, are dry at one period of the Martian year. As the snow melts these great watercourses begin to flow, bringing renewed life. Herbage springs up luxuriantly on the banks, and as the water creeps along the green band can be seen, 'keeping step' with the flow. That season of the Coming of the Water must be a festive time for the Martians. What manner of people are they?

Some picture them as huge ant-like beings, others as monster men. In all probability they are like no animal we have here on earth. Mathematicians have proved that a creature the size and weight of an elephant could hop as lightly as a gazelle on Mars. If the Martians were of our own size and stature they could move over the surface of the ground in gigantic bounds of hundreds of yards.

I could sit for hours watching that spinning ball. One's own little life falls into true perspective, all pettiness and littleness of mind becomes apparent, even pain, sorrow, and disappointment, sink into insignificance. We are humbled. It is amazing to think we can actually *see* another world which, in space, is one hundred times farther away than the moon! Perhaps one day we shall build a telescope which will bring Mars as near as the moon and then we may be able to learn a good deal more about it.

I think the most thrilling thing about the planet is the sight of those polar snows. There also is the evidence before one's eyes of creatures whose one aim, like our own, is self preservation, or better still, of preservation of the race; a true socialistic and unselfish community. From our station in the dark temple of the Observatory we can watch, like Gods, the epic struggle of another intelligent people for survival, the same old struggle which must only end in ultimate defeat. Not until we are driven into a common brotherhood by the necessity for self preservation shall



The Heron at Wildwood Pool



The Lone Hunter

we cease to war with one another. Then, and only then, shall we come together at last to fight the final battle, not against our own species, but against that implacable foe which would deny us life. Then only will our knowledge of science be pooled for the common good.

Perhaps these thoughts are rather depressing. We think that war can never be removed, it is part of life. Perhaps as we fight with one another we are unconsciously training ourselves for this last great battle of Man versus Nature. There will be enough 'copy' in that final battle to satisfy the most energetic reporter. Only a writer like H. G. Wells could do it justice.

It seems to me that Astronomy should play a much more important part in our education than it does at present. Our attention is not yet drawn to the heavens, we prefer to be sublimely ignorant of the writing in the skies. A close study of astronomy would surely alter the whole of man's outlook on life, it would make him more generous of mind and deed, and larger of heart.

March 8th. The lone hunter

THE snow (which had been falling all day) was thinning as I made my way up the steep hill below the Devil's Staircase. How gloomy the dark trees seemed against the dead sky, how barren the fields! I clambered up the bank and found a hiding place under the roots of a large ash tree. It was a natural cave, hollowed out under the very core of the mighty trunk. In front of me the knotted hawsers of the roots formed a spy hole. Through it I could see, on my right, a bare snow-mantled field fringing the wood, with not a living thing to break its dazzlingly white expanse.

On my left rise the tall trees above the Devil's Staircase. I had been in this hiding place for about twenty minutes when I felt that something was walking past. Immediately, on applying my eye to the spy hole, I saw a large red fox trotting along through the snow, not five feet from me. His mask was drooped and his brush low, a few white flakes of snow lay on the rich thick hairs of his winter coat. He was the picture of dejection. I have watched foxes for years but this was the most intimate glimpse I have ever had. He was utterly 'fed up' with the dreary winter. Perhaps hunting had been poor, though he seemed in good condition.

All day he had been lying up in some snug retreat, now he was setting out for his night's foraging; the battle for self preservation is harder in winter.

On he went until he reached the ditch and then I thought I would play a little trick upon him. I whistled once, a long, low, whistle. The effect was magical. Instantly the weariness was thrown aside like a cloak. His fluffed-out coat went slim, his mask switched round, one ear was cocked one way, one another, and he looked back, not at my tree, but at the wood

behind me with cunning half-shut eyes, which made him appear as if he were smiling. Then with a perfectly beautiful skipping motion he slipped between a gap close to an oak tree and vanished in the gloom of the trees behind.

After this interesting episode I left my hide under the root and went down the steep bank to my 'cubby hole' under the elders. Here another little adventure awaited me.

Above my head the thick black boughs of the old tree arched over and the leaves from last autumn had made a natural thatch. Upon it the snow lay in a thick blanket.

On all sides I heard the gentle rustle of falling flakes, but soon there was a louder rustle and a tiny stream of powdery snow fell down from the roof above my head. I kept quite still. Again there was a rustle, a leaf fell. Some small person was busy up above. And at last I saw what it was.

I was suddenly aware that two very large and bright black eyes were looking into mine with an expression of utter amazement. It was a wee red mouse. I could see its little pink feet, amazingly like hands, holding on to the branches. The astonishment on the face of this small gnome was excruciatingly amusing, I had to bite my lip to prevent myself bursting out into a loud laugh.

For three minutes we regarded each other with unwinking stare. As I watched his eyes the puzzled look faded and he withdrew into the dead leaves and began to busy himself once again on his secret work.

More thin powderings fell, like sugar from a castor. I could not resist rousing him once more, I wanted to see that little wild sprite peer out at me. So I gently kicked the supporting boughs with my foot. Dead quiet ensued. No more rustlings, no more snow dust, utter silence! This was even more amusing. I could picture the little creature sitting listening, its eyes big with renewed fear. Perhaps it was a cruel amusement on my part. And then came the final act. A small brown shape appeared at the top of one of the elder stems. And, believe it or not, that mouse turned round and slid down that branch like a child sliding down the bannisters!

A flick and rustle and he was gone, nor did I see him again.

Night fell as I left the wood and the last light was full of vague shadowy wings as the rooks streamed in, silently, for the warmth and cover of the trees.

March 9th. Evening in the woods

It always seems to be evening when I am in the woods. It is then I wait for pigeons as they come in to roost. So very many of these entries seem to deal with this subject, yet every evening seems different; always there is something interesting to note and record.

Tonight snow still lay between the hazel thickets of Shortwood, though up the rides it had partly melted, for the sun had shone at midday and we are sensing the thaw at long last.

Standing deep among the hazels away from the main ride I waited, letting my eye roam over the bare trees and the blue snow drifts. Westwards the sun was sinking, a deep rose-red globe, half-hidden by the tangle of hazel boughs. No thrushes sang, but a robin piped its autumn-like trill from a nearby bush.

There were a few catkins on the hazels but all were tightly rolled, they had not yet assumed the golden hue of real spring. I was standing in a little clearing. To reach this place I had to creep under briars and thorns, down a winding secret trail.

I was quite invisible to anyone passing up the ride a few feet away. Though it was well after six o'clock there was still a good deal of light in the sky for the sun had not yet dipped below the horizon. Two jays moved jauntily among the tops of some aspens a hundred yards distant and when one of them flew away it looked like a giant bullfinch, the white rump was distinctive. I looked at my watch. In five minutes I knew the first pigeon would appear, they keep very much to a time table. And appear it did, to the second. It was not a wood pigeon however, but a stock dove. A minute later a whole flock of them appeared, wheeling about over the tree tops. The stock doves are always the first wild doves to come in to roost.

They are extremely like the tame pigeons, indeed it is said that tame pigeons and stock doves frequently interbreed. (Tame pigeons, by the way, very rarely perch on trees, though I have seen them do so.) The snow-drifts among the underwood turned from blue to mauve and gathering vapours rapidly darkened the sky. There were snow clouds, and soon a flurry of flakes came wandering down.

As it got darker the rooks began to come to roost. This nightly gathering of ebon-plumaged birds is a never ending source of interest to the observing naturalist. At first they fly high in the sky, crossing and re-crossing the woods, sometimes they all settle in the top of the tall trees and hold long excited conversations. The jackdaws are always with them, their shrill 'Kack Jacks' mingle with the deeper caws of the more sedate rooks. Both these species have the keenest sight, but when the dusk comes they become partially blind. Then the wood pigeons, which have sharper sight in the half-light, fly off before one can get in range, but the rooks and daws may be shot in any number as they fly low overhead. I never shoot rooks and daws and so I watched them manoeuvring about right over my head. Their dark wings seemed to fill the sky. One by one the black birds come down among the tree tops and the constant clamour dies away. They will

be astir at sun-up tomorrow, going out to the fields before the wood pigeons. Darkness had come to the sweet woods,¹ every bird had settled down for the night.

In a few weeks from now winter will be only a memory.

Already under these glimmering snow-drifts the primroses are making ready, soon every woodland glade will re-echo to the faery cadences of the willow warblers. When shall I hear the first? I will make a guess . . . April 7th?¹

For countless years has their sweet fresh music sounded in English woodlands. For months the dark earth may sleep in the grip of frost and the bare trees drip mournfully, but life is below my feet in safe storage. The husk may die but life cannot. Does not this thought give comfort?

When my body gets too old it will perish like the husk and mingle with the earth, but the life within me is imperishable, it cannot be touched at all.

To develop this theory (that life is indestructible). We know that at one time this earth could not maintain life, that it was a molten ball, like the sun. Only when it cooled did life appear. And I believe that life appears automatically if conditions are suitable.

As Lowell says, 'If a planet be capable of furnishing carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrous phosphorus and sulphur, under suitable temperature conditions, it seems inevitable that life will ensue as that the two elements of sodium and chlorine will unite to form salt when the heat and pressure are right'.

I cannot believe, as some do, that life on this planet is an 'accident'. There are surely no 'accidents' in natural laws.

I know this to be so indisputably true that I am uplifted. Death has no terror.

Life is not our personal property. Through the complicated machinery of our bodies we are aware of life. Man has developed, but his mind is still growing, we are yet only half-formed. Though imprisoned in a beast's body we are aware of things spiritual and beautiful, we still progress, unlike the animals which appear to be static.

No man can say where this development will end. We must always be half-animal however, we must eat, mate, and die, as the animals do. But man's spirit will march on, he will come to see greater wonders in the world about him, and more beauty and loveliness in nature, from which sweetness may be drawn as a bee draws nectar from a flower.

March 10th. Signs of Spring

GREAT numbers of snowdrops are now appearing in the garden and the rooks are getting busy by Dingle Cottage. I saw the first tramp of the year

¹ See entry, April 10.

this morning, he reminded me of a worn and faded tortoiseshell butterfly which has wintered in a crevice of bark and has emerged to spread his tattered wings in the growing power of the sunlight. The mild air is hinting at vague perfumes, there is that 'spring' smell everywhere. In one sheltered meadow I saw two male blackbirds jousting, sure sign of spring. They ran after each other through the grass, sparring for an opening, and circled about warily, like boxers, with tails depressed and bills held low. And lambs are appearing in the fields as thick as mushrooms overnight.

A little after midday I was surprised to see two bats circling about in full sunlight, high over the village.

No ice remains on the rockery pool which has remained bound since Christmas and one ancient goldfish is swimming lazily round. He is the sole survivor of some half-a-dozen I put in last year. This fish does not seem 'too good', he has a list to port and seems unduly lethargic.

Despite this spring weather the rooks by Dingle Cottage still seem to be absorbed in honeymoon delights, sitting two and two among the topmost branches. A few are making half-hearted attempts at nest building. Perhaps we are yet to have a last hard spell of frost and these birds know it. It is a fact that in some subtle way birds can foretell weather. Water rails have been known to raise their nest several feet on a change of wind, working feverishly until they dropped asleep from sheer exhaustion and resuming their labours as soon as they awoke. By 'raising' I mean of course adding to the bulk of the nest, and so elevating the centre 'cup'.

And so this winter draws to its end, the most rigorous since 1855.

Some localities experienced two hundred and fifty hours of unbroken frost. Forty degrees of frost were registered on the 15th of January at Farnham, Surrey, and London had more snow than she has experienced for two hundred years. It would have been a doubly hard winter if we had had to experience bombing on the scale of 1940.

A golden plover passed over my head this morning as I stood on a high hill near Clipston. On this same hill, some years ago, a farmer accounted for a whole flock of golden plover one autumn day. He put them up again and again. No doubt, the poor trusting birds had recently arrived from Polar regions and had probably never seen a man before.

Snow still lies under the hedges and the roadside grass has a 'pressed down' appearance due to its long 'submergence'.

March 18th. The first crocus

THE first crocus, a little golden club, has appeared miraculously under the birch trees. The crocus gives me a peculiar satisfaction. It is my favourite spring-time flower. In that golden colour last year's sunlight seems to shine once again.

I see that the prices of wild birds for eating purposes are as follows. Sea gulls, crows, rooks, are 3/6d a brace. Pigeons 3/6d each and starlings 4/- a dozen.

From the above list one might think we are starving, which is very far from the case. For my part I would not kill and eat one of these birds, save the pigeon and perhaps a young rook. As to starlings, even the hawks will not eat them, nor yet my dogs. The flesh is bitter, but I suppose a French chef could make even a dish of worms most appetising.

Moorhens are fetching high prices and this cannot be wondered at. I know of a farmer who has always preserved his moorhens as religiously as his partridges, allowing nobody near the pond where they breed.

Chaffinches are beginning to chase each other about in the woods. This is a sure sign of spring. Their song is continuous also and they sing until late dusk.

March 24th. The blessed sun

THE loveliest day we have had so far this year. Not a breath of wind stirring, the smoke from the village chimneys going straight up, golden crocus opening wide on every hand, and in the distance the sleepy 'Caw Caw' of nesting rooks. As I sat writing these notes the first butterfly of spring flew by, a lovely brimstone. Its colours match the opening tender yellow green of leaves.

Across the meadow I see Jackdaws busy about their holes in the elm trees. Others are circling round and diving about with closed wings. Two aeroplanes pass, at target practice. The stuttering machine guns drown the caw of the rooks and as the planes pass along the sky, backed by the cloudless blue of the heavens, I hear a loud crash from a nearby shed. One of the spent bullets had hit the roof. The two machines drone westwards and the purr of their guns die away.

On March 20th a song thrush was observed making a close inspection of the *macracarpi* bushes. It went from bush to bush and finally began to fetch nesting material. By evening the foundations of the nest were laid. She continued the work the following day and then left the half-built nest.

March 27th. Song thrush returns

THE song thrush has returned to her nest and is now working hard, bringing mud from the pond-edge for the lining. It is amazing how this 'plaster' will stand any amount of weather. Long after the outer casing has rotted away the mud cup remains, sometimes for as long as three years!

There is a robin building in the arbour ivy and a blackbird also.

The following remark made by a 'local' is worth recording. The Air

Raid Warden remonstrated with him for showing a light from a bonfire at the back of his house.

'Well, what's wrong with that? If it's at the back of the house them Garmans won't see it will they?'

This remark was made in all seriousness.

On the uplands fields I notice tufts of grey fur. This means that the hares are sparring.

March 28th. The astounding traveller

I HAVE just had a very remarkable conversation with a man on the subject of eels. This fellow, a hairdresser (why are so many hairdressers fishermen?) gave me the following story. One day he was on his way to his fishing ground in the early morning. The time was summer. A heavy dew was on the grass. As he walked along the towpath of a canal he suddenly noticed very many creatures moving in the grass at his feet and on looking down he saw a number of small eels making their way towards the water.

Now, one has heard of eels travelling overland, but few people have seen this for themselves.

One autumn morning, some years ago, I happened to be wandering across a marshy field below the last of the three ponds mentioned earlier in this book, when I came upon what I at first took to be a motor tyre. On looking more closely I saw it was a large eel of quite five pounds in weight. It was alive and uninjured. The nearest water was two hundred yards away. There is no doubt that it was on its way to join a brook which flows down the valley at a distance of a quarter of a mile. To reach it the creature would have to cross a railway and several thistly fields where there was no water of any sort.

Even in the Midland counties many field ponds hold eels. I knew that this eel I chanced upon was starting on the first stage of that most astounding of all emigrations. He had completed the first two hundred yards of journey of many thousands of miles, to the breeding ground of All The Eels, in the Atlantic Ocean, a spot between the Leeward Islands and the Bermudas. If there is not romance in that, if the reader is not overwhelmed by the astounding fact, then he must suffer sorely from lack of imagination!

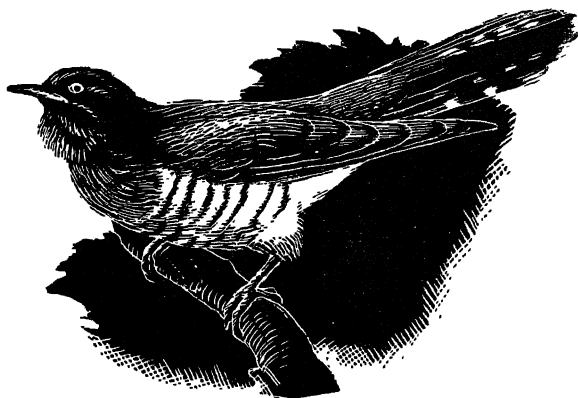
Now, how, in the first place, did this eel reach this pond, which was set so far away in the fields? Even the fact of it being in the stream would have been remarkable, though we know that every stream ultimately finds the sea. But when the eel was small, when it was little more than an elver, how did it encompass the journey across those dry and thistly fields which lay between it and the pond? More wonderful still, how did it know the pond was there?

We do not find dead eels lying about in fields or upon roads, it is only very rarely that eels are seen out of water. I cannot help thinking that there is yet a lot to be learnt on this subject. There may be two races of eels, those that go down to the sea, and those that stay inland and breed, yet no female eel in spawn has ever been caught.

Even the mystery of the swifts does not approach this baffling riddle, even the migration of birds pales into insignificance. The elvers ascend the rivers from the sea in Spring. At that season the fields would be damp and the ground moist after the winter rains, but the surface of the meadows dries rapidly, especially after a windy March. There is more moisture in the autumn, for heavy dews then occur nearly every morning. Extensive overland migrations of the young eels may take place at night, but if that is so, we should have discovered it. And so this mystery, of how eels find their way to land-locked ponds, is still to be explained. It may be possible they are carried thither by birds, but this is unlikely.

Fishponds spinney was warm in the spring sunshine. Since I last visited this delectable spot many of the trees have been cut down. The ash poles had been sawn into lengths and stacked neatly just inside the gate. Green wood-sorrel was growing up between the lower poles. In the deep dark oval of the pool the bullrushes were ochre-white, showing no sign as yet of new growth. But as I stood in the full sun by the pond's margin, there crept on the air that faint and rare boggy perfume which I have only noticed in springtime. Sparkie, busy as ever under the rhododendrons, put up a mallard duck. She burst forth from among the sedges with a great bustle and sparkle of water drops, and flew quacking over the trees. There was no nest, but she means business there. Wild duck are particularly fond of such a nesting site. Sitting dreamily on the warm bank, with the sweet boggy smell in my nostrils, I heard the first chiff-chaff of the year 'chaffering' among the ash trees and thick bushes at the far end of the pond. Before me the still water was a warm amber colour, a venturesome bee hummed by, and a brimstone flew across the pond from one side to the other.

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CHAPTER XIII

Spring

April 1st. The first egg

April at last! So we have won through to the tape once more, like a runner who has finished a race. There is a sense of relief in the knowledge that behind us lies all the cold and snow, and the lowering skies which shielded us from the sun.

And to celebrate this first of April the song thrush has deposited an egg in the nest among the macraçarpi bushes! There are few British birds' eggs so beautiful as that of the song thrush. The blue tint reflects the April sky above. It is a never-failing source of pleasure to see those lovely azure black-spotted eggs reposing in their mud casket (which should be lined with black velvet). For they seem to me very like precious stones.

Fittingly too, this All Fools' Day, the weather was typically springlike, with fits of brooding stormcloud and light showers, and then the warm sun once more came out, winking and flashing on the trees and bushes. I realize with a slight shock that in a few weeks these notes will have 'covered' the year.

The jackdaws are becoming very excited. In the early mornings, always soon after sunrise, and not later in the day, they career about the old church tower. It is their form of 'P.T.' The black rascals enjoy life as much as any bird.

This merry rogue of the pale blue eye is ever ready for a romp and a race, and though he is the very devil after my chickens, I love him. The magpie too is another favourite. The strange thing about these odd amusing birds is that one very rarely sees a magpie leave or enter its nest. At my old home they build every year in the top of the cedar on the lawn,

close to the house and in full view of it. But I never see the parents arrive or depart.

April 5th. The heron at Wildwood pool

As I walked up the slope from Wildwood late this evening I saw a fine picture of a heron. Dusk was falling and low rain clouds framed the yellow sunset. A strange sound caught my ear, as of air blown through a paper tube, a sudden 'russsh'. What could it be? Looking back I saw the square pool, inky black under its wall of trees. . . . 'Russsssh' the sound came again, louder this time.

Then I saw the heron. The bird had come down from a great height. He had evidently been passing over and had caught a gleam from the pool. He had checked himself in mid air and was now coming down as rapidly as a stunting lapwing. Down, down, he came, once he seemed to turn a somersault, as though struck by a charge of shot. The curious sound had been caused by the air pressure on his wide vanes. Then he flattened out and dropped in to the margin of the pool in a graceful noiseless glide, to alight on a sunken branch at the farther end of the water. I saw the slender grey body standing to attention, seemingly as slim as a withered reed, then seeing all was quiet, he stalked gravely forward into the shallow, his head sunk in his shoulders, and began his fishing. A fine wild picture it was, this handsome crane-like bird, standing in such a sombre setting, with the dark clouds masking the last light and the dull gleam on the surface of the pool lying like a bronze shield at the foot of the wood. A fine subject for a picture indeed, one that will linger in memory.

April 6th. The song thrush deserts

FOR some unknown reason the song thrush has deserted from its nest in the macrocarpi bushes. As an experiment I took the full clutch and boiled them in a saucepan. The white would not set but turned to a jelly, but the yolk was excellent, as good as the yolk of a domestic hen's egg. Some people who live in the remoter parts of the country use the yolk of wild birds' eggs for cake-making, though as a rule the average villager will not touch any of these experimental dishes.

I removed the nest, which had been constructed with such care and labour. I hope she will build another close by before the season passes.

April 7th. Tanglewood after supper

IN normal times (in April) the gun is laid aside, but these days are different. The larder has been empty for some time now and there are still many pigeon to be shot, not breeding birds, but foreign flocks which will stay on until late spring to take their fill of the farmer's growing crops.

So this evening, after an excellent (but unsatisfying) dish of vegetable pie (Woolton pie) I bethought me of Tanglewood. When I dropped over the five-barred gate on to the clover field the strong sun was full in my eyes. It shone on the clover and the stubble stalks glistened. Halfway along the headland my eyes, constantly on the rove, caught sight of a hump out in the field which threw a shadow. It was a hare, crouched in its form. As soon as my eyes rested on it, it sprang up, within thirty yards of me, and went away with that curious loping dog-like gait. This 'lope' of the hare is very deceptive; I have often missed a seemingly easy shot. Even in war time I do not shoot hares at this season, and he went away unhurried and unharmed.

The strong wind which was blowing had whipped up the reservoir into quite a heavy sea, so that the entire surface appeared very like a scrubby rug with the pile brushed up the wrong way. On the plough on my left plovers were diving and tumbling in the sunlight, calling 'A week, a week, two bullocks a week!' Above the wind I could hear the murmur of the reservoir, a curious faltering, rushing sound.

I went down to the far end of Tanglewood and crawled along my own private hunting trail under the blackthorn. These blackthorns have grown so top-heavy they have arched right over, forming thorny cloisters in which I saw many mossy nests of thrushes. Some of these nests were old, though they looked new because the moss was still growing and alive with new verdant green.

The blackthorn was budding. Every twig was dotted with innumerable tiny white points. In a day or two they will be a smother of fairy-like white blossom. I reached my secret chamber in the very heart of the wood. Already the sun was glowing like a red coal between the bare oak stems. From my left came the steady murmur of troubled water. I heard a bullfinch pipe, and soon no less than four of these beautiful little birds came hopping about in the blackthorn overhead, all cocks. They were chiselling off the white blackthorn buds and stuffing themselves. Then a chiffchaff came. But he was silent, as indeed were all the woodland choristers; not a song thrush sang or a blackbird warbled. The truth is that most birds dislike singing on a blustery night.

Slowly the wind died away as the sun sank down and the gentle hiss of the adjacent water sank to silence. No pigeons appeared, however, and I began to think I was going home with a light game bag. If the birds were coming they should have been in. So I gathered up my belongings and crawled back down my path until I reached the margin of the wood. I walked gently along the woodside, listening now and then for the clap of a pigeon's wing. Near the end I saw, on the far side of the wood, two dark shapes up in a tree. Were they roosting pigeon or crows?

Then one of them moved to a higher branch and I saw it silhouetted against the dim light. It *was* a pigeon without a doubt. Then began a real Red Indian stalk. I crawled along from tree bole to tree bole until I reached a little briar bush. Nearer I dare not go. In the tree I now saw no less than seven wood pigeon, settling down for the night. The range was long and the light was bad. When I raised the gun I could not see the foresight bead and the pigeons were invisible. But I pulled the trigger and to my great delight three fat birds fell dead to the ground. Now, there was nothing sporting in that actual shot. I can already hear the sportsman who reads this snorting indignantly.

No, but the sport lay in the stalking. It had taken me half an hour to stalk them. One false move and they would have flown. I flattered myself that not many men could have shot those birds.

April 10th. The first willow warbler

As I stood in my little birch wood this morning I heard the first willow warbler. At last, after so long! So my guess of March 9th was wrong. I guessed then it would be April 7th, so I am three days out in my reckoning.

The robin in the ivy arch is sitting hard on a full clutch of eggs.

April 11th. A strange funeral custom

SOME time ago a friend told me he had attended the funeral of an M.F.H. in the west country. As is the usual custom, when the coffin was lowered into the grave, the huntsman blew 'Gone to ground'.

It was an afternoon in December, the trees were bare and a sad mist lay over the distant vale where the Master had had many a good run. The sobbing notes of the horn were very moving, floating out thin and clear on the moist air like the song of a gnat. It seemed hard to believe, so my friend told me, that the dead man could not hear those clear sad notes.

And then he experienced a revulsion of feeling. It seemed absurd and childish to blow a hunting horn over the grave of a man who had chased such a lowly animal as a fox! Now I am not so sure I should not have felt the same way. In the old days when the noblemen chased the deer in the great forests of England there would be more justification for it.

Then the chase had real nobility, the venison provided a Royal feast, and the hart was protected by many ancient Forest Laws. And my friend reflected (with some truth) that if poor people, working class folk, did such a thing, the custom would be immediately called pagan and suppressed.

The truth is that foxhunting is but a relic of those former glorious days of Old Merry England, it is a mere feeble travesty of days when stag and boar hunting was the sport of the aristocracy. There is more foolish

snobbery in the hunting field than anywhere else, though not, I think, among those people who really *are* (or were) somebody.

Foxhunting may have gone for good. After the war there may be no one with the money (or the leisure) to indulge in it. Will that be a good thing?

Speaking for myself I should be sorry to see it go, as would most countrymen. It is one of the last and most picturesque relics of ancient England and it is sad to think it is in danger of extinction.

April 13th. The barn full of rabbits. 'Only the wind'

A LARGE red brick barn I know of stands away by itself in the middle of a wide field. Why anyone should have built such an imposing building in such a lonely spot is hard to imagine. But it interested me because a farmer told me a curious story about this place. .

Apparently the floor had perished and a colony of rabbits had taken possession of it. One day last winter this same farmer ferreted and shot no less than *forty-three* rabbits from this barn in a single day! I suppose the little beasts had found the warren nice and dry with a roof over their heads.

This same farmer (who is a great friend of mine and, though a busy man, finds time to give many valuable hours in the Home Guard) also told me a very amusing story about an old country doctor who used to live in these parts.

One day a labourer came to see the doctor, complaining of pain after meals. 'It's only the wind, Doctor, I know' he began . . . The doctor cut him short. 'Only the wind you say, only the wind? What is it that tears roofs from houses and wrecks ships at sea? what is it that brings even the mighty trees to the ground? And yet you say *only the wind!*'

April 14th. The first swallow

I COUPLE this date with the 29th of October last when I saw the lone swallow flitting about in the lee of the wood. In equally fitting circumstances I saw the first swallow of the year this morning, against a background of blue sky and tender opening birch leaves. I had just stepped out on to my little lawn when I heard the unmistakable liquid twitter of a swallow, and lifting my eyes I saw it pass over a roof top. It was gone in an instant, but I saw it long enough to establish its identity. And then I knew that the book of winter was surely closed. It was to me, figuratively speaking, that self-same swallow to which I had said 'goodbye' by the woodside in the snowy gloom of that autumn night last year.

Here he was back again, safe and sound, to taste the joys of another English summer. I also knew that in all probability I was the only person in the village who had noticed this little traveller. I looked down the village street. The sentry by the Manor Gate was chirruping at a white dog, the

warm sun winking on his bayonet. He was a grim reminder of the times we live in. The swallow had passed by him unnoticed. Nor had the milkman seen it. He was pushing his barrow up the hill. All so busy with their own affairs!

I shall see many swallows now in the days and weeks to come; every day more will arrive, but not one of them will give me the same thrill of pleasure. Some will say, 'Why does this fellow ramble on like this about so trivial an incident?' Or another will say "What a fuss to make about a bird, a very ordinary bird!" Yet I maintain that the advent of the swallow is not an unimportant thing to the Idle Countryman. I have looked for it so eagerly; for the past week or two I have been anxiously scanning the sky for a glimpse of that trim blue bird with the curved wings and forked tail. The delight I take in observing the simple world of Nature cannot be conveyed in words. I feel I have had more than my share of these delights during the last eleven months. And I am greedy for more.

April 15th. Sand martins

SIX or seven sand martins were hawking about Rendell's sand pit this afternoon. Poor mites, they will have to drill new holes or go elsewhere, for Hitler affects even the birds with cruel blight. For years this pit has lain derelict, thistles and weeds choked the machinery, the wooden sheds have fallen into decay. But now big concrete mixers are at work, new machinery is humming and chuffing in this once quiet place, and all the old nesting holes in the face of the orange cliff have been brutally sliced away.

The wild violets are in full bloom now. As I lay on a bank by the forest edge I was surrounded by them, a perfect carpet of purple bloom. And the catkins in the woods are no longer golden, they have turned rusty brown and are dropping. From all sides came the delicious warble of willow wrens. These birds are now in full strength and every little copse and spinney is made musical.

April 19th. Fieldfares and hawk

A FLOCK of fieldfares were in the ash trees in Hollow's spinney this afternoon, their clucking notes entirely out of place in such a spring picture. I associate that 'Chuck chuck' with the bleak days of winter. I turned along the headland and walked towards the tree on which they sat. The yellow earth, dry and powdery from lack of rain, stained my shoes. On every side was ploughed land, golden ochre in the sunlight. All at once there was an indescribable rush and bustle. A terrified fieldfare nearly hit me in the face, others streaked along close to the hedge, dodging and swerving. Then I saw the cause of this sudden commotion, a sparrow-hawk. It shot through

a fence gap and in a flash I saw its talons fasten on to a fieldfare. Away went the hawk, bearing the screaming fieldfare, clutched tightly in those cruel claws. It flew on down the hedge and at last alighted by a small stream, by which time the screams of its wretched victim had ceased entirely. Then he began to eat it. I put him up again, expecting he would leave the bird, but he carried it off with him.

These sparrow-hawk tactics are copied by some of our own 'hurry bombers' in their raids on enemy territory. They skim low behind houses and trees and dart through gaps on their unsuspecting prey. No wonder the sparrow-hawk is feared in the bird world. The unhappy finch or thrush, peacefully hopping in the stubble close by the hedgeside, can never know when death may come darting through a gap to strike it down. 'Hedgehopping' is indeed a deadly form of attack.

All this month the fieldfares will be leaving these shores for the pine forests of Northern Europe. It is suspected that some have bred in England. I always remember my own brother's story. When he was a boy he was a keen egg collector and a very good naturalist. He knew every British land bird by sight and song.

And one day in late spring, in a pine wood near Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, he came upon a small colony of nesting fieldfares.

He procured an egg, which I still have in my collection. Unfortunately the egg of the fieldfare is almost identical with that of a blackbird. But he was sure that the birds which he saw were fieldfares, and as they are quite striking birds and not to be readily confused with any other British bird, either summer or winter visitor, I cannot believe he was mistaken. Perhaps the fieldfares still breed in that fir wood, the whereabouts of which I do not know.

And so the quiet pattern of the year is woven. The face of the country is changing almost hourly just now. Sometimes, when walking (as I was this afternoon by Hollow's spinney) I visualize a place at another time of year, in different lights and seasons. I see it in the summer when the weeds and undergrowth are thick in leaf, I see it in sun and rain, snow and frost. Each locality has its own individuality, I know their every mood. I might add that this particular affection, I might almost say hunger, which I have for all these little odd out-of-the-way places, whether they be fields, or ponds, or woods, is perhaps very 'animal-like'. So perhaps do the foxes and badgers come to know, and have a partiality for, their own particular chosen spots.

I have a complete picture of each one of my favourite localities which is really complete, because I have seen it under every conceivable circumstance, at all seasons, and at all times of day and sometimes at night.

April 24th. Night comes to Brock Hall

THE sight of countless pigeons, tossing and wheeling over the thorny wilderness of Brock Hall, made me get into touch with the owner of the place and this morning he rang me up and told me I could have a night or two at them.

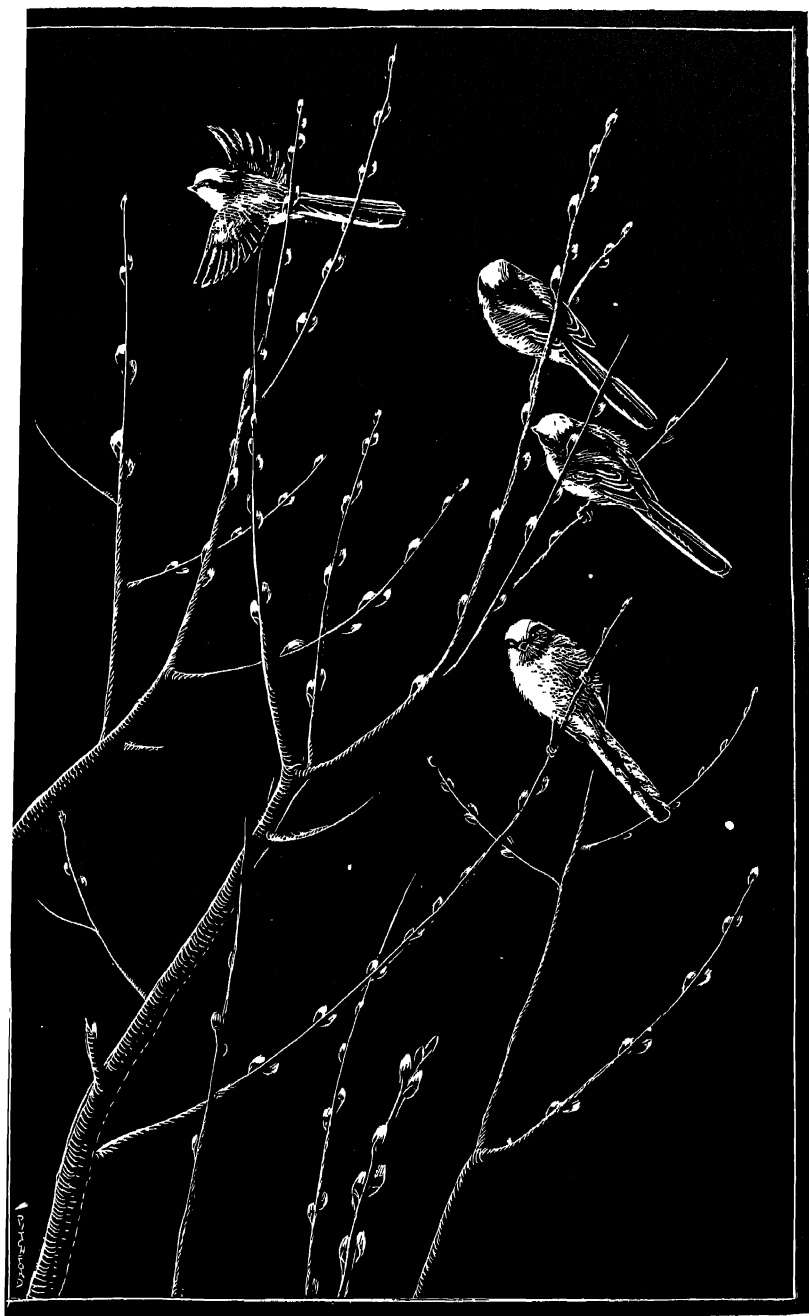
So, in the late afternoon, I packed up some tea, filled my cartridge bag, and set off in the car to the head of the lane. Before long I was walking down the rutted track between the blackthorn bushes on the mile-long tramp to the wood. It was an afternoon of brilliant sun and wind, a cold wind, blowing from the north. Even though only two days have gone since last I passed that way the blackthorn showed more bloom, the hedges were thicker in leaf.

Just before four o'clock I reached the broken gate leading into the wood. The masses of thorn formed a barrier to the northerly gale and when I dropped over I found the air warm and windless, though in the distance the ashes were clashing and bending, seemingly as bare as winter trees.

Before advancing farther I took stock of the place. With the wind in the north, pigeon would be seeking the lee of the wood, but the ground rose at the south end, and looking that way, I could see the high clump of trees were open to the blast. At the north end the ground was low, and here ash poles grew and a few very tall willows. This end of the wood was protected by a slow swelling hill of plough, and I judged that if any pigeon were about they would go straight to the ash poles. This surmise was correct for, even as I waited by the gate, I saw a small flock come in over the thorns and go direct to the ash poles.

So I made my way along the narrow path, pushing through the broom and brambles, pausing a moment to watch the tall cedars whipping and tossing in the full glare of the afternoon sun. I came to the badger's earth and found fresh claw marks on the soft mud (we had rain in the night). Much of the bedding had been removed. Only a few wisps of grass remained. I found some sort of cover by the ash poles, under mossy alders. What a jungle of a place! For years the wood has been neglected, it had the aspect of a primeval forest. The trees had fallen, some had lodged one upon the other; like the thorns in Tanglewood the blackthorn bushes had bent over with their own weight of growth, moss and lichen covered everything. And in all this place there was no sign of man. Brock Hall is the most remote and wildest wood I know, it is a long walk over fields to the nearest road and that is only a narrow unimportant country lane leading nowhere in particular.

Magpies chattered, jays screamed, two marsh tits came by, a tree creeper went jerking up an alder stem close beside me, but few other birds were visible or audible.



Spring



The Harvest of Flowers

Somewhere in the thickets a blackbird warbled a few desultory notes but they were drowned by the clash and squeak of the ash poles.

The location of my hide was well chosen and the birds came steadily for some hours. The score mounted, though I missed a good many. By nine o'clock the net on the outside of my big brown game bag contained eight plump pigeon.

And then weary at last of sitting in my ambush (I had been there for five hours, almost without moving) I set off through the bushes on an exploring expedition.

I very soon found a badger's run. I had to bend low to get along it, in some places I went on hands and knees. It took me slap into the centre of the wilderness, a maze of decaying thorn and alder. Some of the thorn bushes, which were hawthorn, had grown to a considerable height. Such bushes are much sought after by magpie and pigeon as breeding places, now and again one of the latter clattered off.

A vista opened out in front of me, a long mossy corridor screened on either side by dense thickets. At the far end two alders grew on either side, forming a sort of postern door. The path was only a foot wide at this place and in the muddy ground, worn bare of moss, were the spoor marks of countless badgers, foxes, and rabbits which evidently used the runway every night. Certainly I was the first human to follow this secret trail.

The sudden vista brought me to a stop, half kneeling on the moss. What a queer place!

Not far away, lying under the thickets, was the skull of a badger, bleached white. I took it up. I could not move the mighty teeth which were firmly bedded in the jaw, the sockets of the eyes were caverns of shadow.

In the West the sun had gone down, the wind still roared against the far side of the wood, it was not a quiet evening. There was something very creepy about the distant 'clash, clash' of branch on branch, as though strange beings were forcing their way through the underbrush. The gloom deepened, the loneliness of the place became poignant.

Here was I, a grown man, deep in the very heart of this forsaken, decaying place, miles away from anywhere. If any accident happened to me now, if I broke my leg or severed an artery, I should die like an animal, no one would be any the wiser. It would be days before my remains would be found. Wild animals would pick them clean.

But night sends all men to their lairs, as day sends the fox and badger. So I had to go and leave this queer wilderness and return to the warmth and light of a shuttered house among my own kind.

As I passed the badger earth I saw the moon was shining behind the dark-crested cedars which were still tossing in the gale. Gloom and dark

ness descended swiftly. The uneasy broom brushes whipped in the wind, one distant branch seemed to be like the mane of a rearing horse; for a second I felt a primeval fear which passed as quickly as it came.

And then began the long tramp back up the old road, with the tall hedges on either hand. A few pigeon were roosting in the ivy-clad ash trees, they had been driven there by the firing, and clattered off behind the bushes, taking care to keep 'well down'. I should have seen a fox or a badger on the prowl but no doubt the sound of my gun had sent them all below.

In a few hours time, when all was quiet (save the uneasy ash poles, still knocking and squeaking) they would emerge, to go about their secret ways. The old boar badger, who must be *very* old, would go grunting down the path which I had followed, *his* path. He would smell me and turn uneasily aside, as would the fox and rabbit. They will not use that well trodden track for a day or two, not until the hated man smell has been scoured away by rain and wind.

From the age of the trees I should say that this wood was planted well over one hundred and fifty years ago and was originally meant to serve as a harbour for foxes. There is little good timber in it, though there may have been at one time.

It is still one of the finest harbours for a fox in the Pytchley country, and for those who would look it up on the map I would point out that 'Brock Hall' is not its real name. All I will say is, that when hounds meet (or met, for at the moment it looks as though fox-hunting is a thing of the past) at the village of Draughton, they were sure to find Charles James at home, not so very far away, in 'Brock Hall'.

The hawthorn and blackthorn, both very common trees in this part of the Midlands, spread rapidly, and it is these trees which would soon 'reclaim' the land from agriculture and bring it back again to the wild countryside, such as it was a thousand years ago. I know a few stretches of waste land near Finedon where this process is going on unchecked, even though so much land has been brought under cultivation. These thorns have got such a hold, and the land is so mean and starved, that it would be a very costly business indeed to clear it.

April 24th. A Mysterious Sound

FOLLOWING up my visit yesterday I went again tonight to Brock Hall to give the pigeons one more salute. Again it was an evening of brilliant sun and cutting wind, if anything, colder and the gale more violent. It was considerably later when I reached the end of the lane and it was not until well after eight o'clock when I got into hiding.

But whether the great wind kept the pigeon away or whether, as was more likely, the pigeons had had enough of it yesterday, very few birds were seen and I only shot one. I stayed longer tonight, and for a very good reason. For, as I made my way out of the wood (the time was ten o'clock) I heard a thin whirring noise among the broom bushes on the left of the path. It was like the sound of a cheap fishing reel revolving rapidly. I walked towards it and stood close to the edge of the dark bushes. But the sound stopped, to begin again almost at once from the point in the path I had just left! Again I retraced my steps to my original position, again the sound came again from the broom bushes. And so this mysterious game went on. Though it was darkling I should have seen any bird fly across. What was it?

In this part of the world we never hear or see the nightjar, indeed, strange as it may seem, it is one of the few British birds I have never heard. Yet surely it is too early for them? And this whirring was so metallic, or perhaps reedy would be a better word. Sometimes it lasted for as long as thirty seconds, continuously, by my watch. I have heard lesser white-throats and grasshopper warblers and know their song (some people cannot hear the high-pitched, sibilant reeling of the latter, which seems to shake the air) so what could it be?

In this wild spot anything might be found. I thought of the Night Reeler, that long-forgotten bird of the fens. Yet I should imagine that such a bird would find no place to its liking here, for there is little water and no reeds.

Not a cloud showed over the orange glow of the sunset. Against it the bare branches clattered and rocked, the cedars swished with a muffled roaring. Even the setting of the sun had not quietened the tempestuous wind. It was very like a winter night, for it was now too dark to see the green leaves on the hawthorns.

The sound came again and again, sometimes short, sometimes a long sustained whirr. But whatever it was, bird or beast, it never showed itself, and when I climbed the gate and walked away up the lane I could still hear that strange whirring far behind me in the darkling wilderness of broom and thorn. Even the gusty wind could not drown it, the sound cut through the surging roar as a knife through lard.

It was quite dark when I reached the car, though the moon was coming up, and bomber after bomber winged over with the wind up their tails, droning through the stormy star-spangled sky, Germany bound.

April 29th. Impressions of the Purbeck country

I HERE set down a few impressions of the Purbeck country where I have recently been.

Most impressive were the dazzling white stone-quarries on the cliffs, the entrances to the galleries showing as black square doorways such as one sees in Egyptian temples, blocks of white stone against a brilliant blue sky, and of much wind, which whirled the dust into one's eyes. On the cliffs of Windspit we saw the green rollers thudding on the rocks below us, all was glitter and white dust and tossing spray.

And then that not-to-be-forgotten view of Corfe from Kingston Hill! The castle stood up like the foresight of a rifle in a V gap of the downs. The late spring sun shone warmly, cuckoos called from the hanging woods below. In the topmost branches was the biggest rookery I have ever seen, all busy and noisy birds. I could hear the wheezy squeak of the half-fledged youngsters in the nests. The trees were a lovely colour in the sunlight, for the new-formed buds almost on the point of bursting gave the woodlands a reddish wash, or stain, of colour.

Corfe lay bathed in the low, evening light but Poole Harbour and Southampton were partly lost in haze which lay over all the rather dreary wastes of heath country between the downs and the sea. Very high over Corfe two young spittfires were playing like eagles. A few hours back they had sent a Hun spinning down into the sea just beyond the cliffs by Windspit and we had missed the spectacle by a matter of minutes.

And then . . . the castle! Bereft of trippers, orange peel, and ice cream vendors, I saw it this morning in the early light. Grey and silver, the village lay deserted, grey tiles on the roofs, silvery-white Purbeck stone in the walls, spots of gold lichen on the thick stone slabs.

High above loomed that most imposing of all British ruins, where the jackdaws were just awaking, wheeling about in the fresh clean light. The towering walls were to them a natural cliff, as natural as any sea cliff. The more venturesome were making the most of the early hour to raid the village. Some came and perched boldly on an adjoining roof ridge, peering with pale eyes at the street beneath. One descended to the gutter to seize a large piece of newspaper which lay there and roguishly flew off with it towards the castle. Little could the Fleet Street printer know where that particular copy was to go, little did he guess it was to be used as a lining to a jackdaw's nest in the ruins of Corfe castle!

In the village not a soul was about, shutters barred the window of Wegg and Tuck, drapers; curtains were drawn across upper windows. Perhaps the inhabitants were sleeping unduly soundly because of late the nights have been a little 'noisy'.

This cold steely light of early morning suited the place, I thought, for castle and village, indeed the whole Island, is cold and grey and white, so white, that after a while the eyes are dazzled. The sky seems bluer there by comparison.

If any impressions remain more strongly than others, they are, naturally enough, of the Castle; black and minute in detail against the soft last light, or pale and unearthly in the dawn. I visited the heath country and Cecily and I ate our lunch on an addery bank, out of the wind. It was hot there and the ground harsh with furze. A great wind boomed in the twisted boughs of an oak close by, it whirled the white dust among the peat-dark heath and stunted pines, and all the while there was the throb throb of patrolling spitfires, which left their white ribbons of vapour in the upper atmosphere. One had the impression they were ceaselessly on the watch. Once a siren wailed from Southampton and we heard the angry chatter of machine guns.

Far away in a grey field a man was ploughing, with a nimbus of white gulls about his head, and the wind drove the pale dusty soil in a cloud athwart the hedge. A cuckoo's voice came, half audible on the wind, and away over Southampton the barrage balloons swam like glistening soap bubbles, hardly visible on the ocean of the sky.

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CHAPTER XIV

Spring

May 6th. The first swift. Scarcity of the turtle dove. I lose a good pal

A single swift was seen wheeling round the church tower this evening, he is the advance guard of the sooty band which will soon be hawking and screaming about the village street. Cuckoos are here in force now and call continuously in the early mornings. The coming of the swift almost completes the list of spring migrants with the exception of the spotted flycatchers and the whitethroats. Turtle doves are not so numerous as they used to be. The reason is hard to find. Five years back it was a common bird in the Midlands, especially at harvest time.

I have just suffered a grievous loss.

Sparkie, the little spaniel bitch which has figured largely in these notes, had to go to the Vet.'s last week. For some time she has been ailing and would not go for a walk. Even when, one evening, I got my gun in an attempt to rouse her, she seemed to be suffering, and though she made a gallant attempt to follow she could get no farther than the lawn. There she sat down and watched me wistfully out of sight, with an expression on her face which plainly told me she did not feel equal to coming with me. The Vet. pronounced internal trouble and thought he could cure her. Yesterday I went to see her. There was nobody about in the yard, but I peeped over the stable door into her stall. She lay stretched out on the stones. I called her gently. She did not rouse herself, only her eye swivelled upwards towards me, unseeing. She did not recognise me.

Now she is dead.

Hundreds of thousands of dog-lovers suffer each year when their

companions die. The devotion of a dog to its master needs no stressing here. We are all travellers for a little while through this world, they are our companions for a short stage of the journey and how tragically short a stage! Their intense devotion rouses within us a corresponding affection.

But I do hate to see a dog treated like a *pampered* child. Women are especially stupid in this respect. Most men have a deep love for their own dogs which is not outwardly apparent. Dogs must always be treated as one would a child of four or five years old; by that I mean one must discipline them and be just in punishment.

When they go they leave behind an aching sorrow, of which one need be in no wise ashamed.

The most lovable habit she had was to bring me some gift on my return home. Whenever she saw me coming afar off she would begin to hunt around for some little thing, a scrap of paper, a bedroom shoe, a stick, or even a leaf. Sometimes this gift was so small it was hardly visible and I only knew she had it in her mouth by her swaggering walk and wagging tail. Whatever she found, she would walk round me in circles, wagging her stump, and would then put her muzzle into my hand, and let me take the 'present'. I always made a great show of delight and this pleased her.

May 8th. Young foxes

BRIGHT sun, strong cool N.E. winds and cloudless skies; this is the weather we have had for the last few days, amazingly uniform, each day to a pattern. I saw the first Orange-Tip today, flying across the garden. And later, on a walk round the old glebe fields, I had a good view of a family of fox cubs playing about the mouth of their earth. This was in a rabbit warren, and within a foot of the cubs were some baby rabbits, likewise sunning themselves.

It is amazing how foxes and rabbits will share the same warren and I have seen fox cubs playing with baby rabbits. As can be imagined, no prettier sight could be seen. Why the vixen does not touch the rabbits is a mystery.

The ash trees are still quite bare, some scarcely show buds. It is a cautious tree and will not put forth its leaves until all chance of frost is past. Four more swifts have appeared over the village.

Barely three weeks remain before this journal will have covered the complete year. I cannot believe that anyone besides myself will find much of interest in it. There are no startling discoveries, no original remarks or fresh observations. When I began it a year ago I never guessed that I should still be here in this peaceful village, still able to enjoy the countryside, and now here we are at the threshold of yet another summer. It is months since

the casement rattled to a bomb, the growling storm has passed for a space from this green Island. But all about the horizon the lightning flickers, the skies are even darker away to the West and to the East. The storm will come back, as a thunder storm returns. So I am thankful for the brief gleam of sunlight which has been mine these last few months. And still this mad world whirls through space and the little ants fight and kill each other. Sometimes it seems that life is but a dream.

Is Nature always to be the stage upon which man must act his part? Cannot it ever be woven more into his life? The average man thinks nothing of Nature, it is a closed book to him. He cannot see beauty in woods or birds or rivers. His idea of pleasure is to make a lot of noise and drink a lot of drink, to shout and gossip, knock a little white ball about, play cards, and live in stuffy houses. Streets, trains, cars, aeroplanes, houses, houses, and yet more houses. . . . Where will it end?

May 16th. A welcome rain

THERE was a lovely rain all last night. It came as a surprise. Cecily and I had just gone to bed when we heard the steady patter outside. Looking through our casement I could see the rich layers of the sycamore leaves shaking as the drops smote them, and from the garden arose sweet odours of lavender, 'pinks', and lilac. From all sides came the windless hiss of the summer rain. Even the sullen ash trees are showing half-breaking leaves. And every little meadow is emerald green.

I have just been reading George Bourne's description of his walk along the towpath of the canal after visiting his dying uncle, John Smith. It is one of the most beautiful pieces of descriptive writing that I know. In most of his books Sturt is more concerned with the simple sleepy talk of old countrymen. He is at his best when writing on this subject, but here and there he sketches in the background so vividly and accurately that one is immediately impressed by the truth and beauty of his writing. Even Hudson cannot surpass some of these country pictures.

May 17th. Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary

T.S.F. BROUGHT me a Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary which he caught at Wappenbury. This insect is very richly marked on the outer wings, it is almost melanistic, and corresponds very closely to that figured in Frohawk's major work on butterflies.

T.S.F. tells me that he has caught others equally richly marked so it may be a local variety. The Small Pearl Bordered is not common in Wappenbury. I myself have never taken it there. Of course, the Pearl Bordered is plentiful throughout the Midlands. G.J. sent me thirty eggs of an Eyed Hawk Moth.

May 18th. Rook shooting

As I mowed the lawn tonight I heard the sinister sound of gunshots from Dingle rookery. The young rooklings are under fire. Poor things, many will be shot, and to think I saw the very beginnings of their cradles up in the tree tops, which rocked in the winds of March!

I could hear too the miserable caws of the parent birds as they wheeled about over the scene of slaughter. Yet this rook shooting is necessary in these times, crops must be husbanded. A soft rain fell later, and all the martins and swallows seemed to go mad with delight. They rushed about the sky, twittering excitedly, and the blackbirds and thrushes seemed happy too. My little garden is so green just now. I sometimes sit and watch it for minutes on end, feasting my eyes on the new growth everywhere and the strong sturdy shoots of the conifers hoisting themselves skywards. All the aubretia is in full flower, and the garden has never seemed so lovely as it is just now. The first hawthorn blossoms are showing in the hedges, in a week they will be fully out.

May 19th. Fighting song thrushes

Two song thrushes were fighting most furiously in the lilacs this evening. They were so incensed they never saw me when I came and stood close to them. They bit and worried each other like terriers and at last one seemed to slip. In some way it hooked its leg over a thin twig and hung suspended with gaping beak. It struggled to free itself but still it hung there powerless.

Meanwhile the other bird sat motionless, watching his victim. I was just about to free the unhappy bird, when with an extra jerk he broke away and flew off, none the worse.

I have introduced some sticklebacks into my ornamental pond and these little fish are thriving. The cock fish are very gay with their blue backs and red throats. This colour fades very rapidly if the fish is unwell, or if confined in a jar full of stale water. It seems to fade in a matter of minutes.

These cock fish are valiant fighters and model fathers. When the hen fish is 'sitting' in the nest he mounts guard and will allow no other creature near. I once saw an amusing little incident. A clumsy water snail approached a stickleback's nest and the cock fish attacked with all his might and main.

But the snail took no heed, it came on like a tank, right over the frail little nest. This incensed the cock fish, which made a mighty onslaught on the clumsy snail and with a final worry of his jaws sent it rolling down the weeds into deeper water. Kingfishers devour a good many of these quaint little fish, despite the fact they have sharp spines on their backs like thorns. I once saw a kingfisher sitting on the back of an iron seat near an ornamental pond in which were many sticklebacks. It repeatedly dived down.

into the water and fetched up a fish, knocking it senseless on the back of the seat, and then swallowing it. In about half an hour I saw it catch fifteen sticklebacks and then it sat for another quarter of an hour apparently the victim of acute indigestion. These birds suffer exceedingly in cold weather.

When the streams and ponds are frozen over, as they were last winter, kingfishers are forced to go away to the coasts, where, in normal circumstances, it is a rare species.

Apropos of hard frost. During last winter, when even the sea was frozen in some parts, my fowling companion S.S. told me that on the west coast of Scotland he found many waders on the shore with their bills frozen into the mud. The wretched birds were unable to free their bills from the iron grip and the short-eared owls, hunting the tide lines, waxed fat on these poor prisoners. My friend found many small waders' heads, with the bills firmly frozen in and their bodies absent. This was the work of the short-eared owls.

Hérons, too, suffer a good deal in winter, as do all the fish-eating birds. It is a strange thing that one does not often see ducks imprisoned in the ice. When the weather is unduly hard they manage to keep an open space by herding together and agitating the water. But in very severe frost even these measures are unavailing.

We had the first thunder-storm of the summer tonight, and a heavy fall of rain, which is badly needed by the farmers. It filled my rockery pool to overflowing and knocked down some tender antirrhinum seedlings which I had just pricked out. My poor little spaniel Sparkie used to be terrified of thunder, and would creep upstairs and hide under the bed. My labrador does not mind it in the least, indeed I have never seen her scared of anything save bullocks. These she cannot tolerate. If I am crossing a field where there are bullocks or cows she sticks as close to my heels as she can.

Most dogs are frightened of thunder, and also of crackers. This is strange in a shooting dog. But I fancy the crack is much more pronounced to their ears than a big 'bang'.

May 20th. First Flycatcher. Old Winterface

THE first spotted flycatcher was seen a little after midday sitting on the sycamore by the pool. It sallied out from the green shade to snap a passing gnat and retired again to its perch. So now the gathering of migrants is complete and this last little traveller has set the seal to summer. Seeing the whiskered diminutive 'bee bird' sitting comfortably among the thick foliage of the sycamore gave me a queer sensation. Here he was, back again as if nothing had happened; he did not seem travel-stained or weary, yet he had only just returned from South or tropical Africa! I simply cannot credit that frail mouse-coloured mite with being such a globe trotter. Quite

independent of air liners and steamers, without luggage of any sort, with wing bones so frail I could crack them between my thumb and finger, here he was, after traversing half the world, sitting quietly on the branch, snapping at passing flies!

Already the fields are golden with buttercups, they have bloomed earlier this year, the recent rains and hot sunshine have brought them on.

Old 'Winterface' was at work down Sperrywell Lane, cutting the roadside weeds. I call him Winterface out of my fancy. He is so 'weathered' and wizened. Like my favourite spinneys I have seen him under all climatic conditions, he is very much part of the woods and fields. On his head he wears a battered grey (or what was once grey) felt hat, the kind of head-gear little boys wear at prep. schools in the summer term. It is no doubt the cast-off from a jumble sale and at one time was adorned by a narrow ribbon. One can still see the darker mark on the felt which rings the hat, just as one sees the marks of a long-lost moulding on weathered masonry.

He was scything the nettles and hemlocks which grow all along the lane in a continuous band. His coat he had folded up neatly and laid on a stone-heap farther back along the road, and a comical-faced terrier was curled upon it, keeping guard. This little dog is a character, for one tooth protrudes like a boar's tusk from its lower jaw, giving it a most sardonic expression. The morning was hot, the bright sun was glaring on the white surface of the lane, but where Winterface was at work the high hawthorn hedge threw a welcome shade.

His strong muscled arms, earth-coloured and hairy, were bared to the elbows, for he had rolled up the sleeves of his blue shirt. They swung rhythmically to and fro before his stooping figure, the horny hands gripping the handles of the scythe. Swish— . . . pause— . . . swish, the delicate white flowerets of the hemlock and blossoming dead nettles swayed and fell gently sideways masking the razor-sharp blade. He worked waist deep in a froth of white flowers and green grass, which hid his corduroys, tied in at the knees. This was indeed a flowery harvest he was cutting . . . swish . . . pause . . . swish. On the opposite side of the road the sun shone with full power on the oaks and hawthorns. Very soon I spied an orange-tip butterfly coming along down the lane, not three feet above the surface. At first it was a mere white jiggling speck, then I saw it clearly, plodding along through the air, jerking from side to side but always following the road. It passed us and went down until a bush hid it from view. Though such a lowly insect it seemed to have personality and a mind of its own, it seemed to know where it was going. It led me to think that butterflies must cover perhaps twenty or thirty miles in the course of a long summer day, though they go to bed early, before the sun has touched the horizon. I saw a turtle dove fly up to an ash tree branch which over-

hung the lane, one of the trees in Hollow's spinney. It saw us and dived down into the hawthorn with fan-shaped tail and a little later I heard it crooning, 'Querrr, querr, querrr, querr!' and from somewhere across the meadows came a cuckoo's mellow bell.

'Lovely growin' weather. I'll soon be diggin' me first 'taters. That's if the frost don't spoil 'em.'

Winterface had stopped his work for a moment, and I saw his knotted hand feel round his waist for the sharpening hone, which he wore like a horizontal bayonet behind his back in a broad leather belt.

'What do you call those white flowers?' I asked, pointing to the hemlock in front of him, which rose in an impudent wall.

He scratched his head, pushing the grey felt backwards. 'Tetches, I calls 'em.'

'Vetches?'

'Tetches; don't know if that's the right name, but that's wot I calls 'em, *tetches*.'

Zinc! kink! zinc! kink! the stone clanked rapidly on the blade. He held the scythe in a cunning manner, cuddling the blade under his left armpit. It was worn unevenly in wavy hollows near the point. The steel was softer in those places.

I doubt if he saw any beauty in the white flowerets of the 'tetch'.

'You've got a lot to cut,' I suggested, glancing along the hedgeside.

'Ah, grows quick, don't it?'

Winterface returned the stone to its scabbard and bent again to his task. Swish — pause — swish. At each pause he moved forward with a funny jerky motion, like some step in a morris dance. The tetches toppled, grass and nettles fell softly over. Not far off a whitethroat bubbled. It had its nest in the nettles perhaps, close to the hedgeside. If that was the case it was 'just too bad', these weeds were all coming down, every one.

I thought that Winterface must see many things down among the grasses and 'tetches', birds' nests and so forth. I asked him whether he found many hidden birds or nests.

'Partridges sometimes and them pettychaps.'

Swish, pause, swish. The cuckoo continued, maddeningly. Lazy bird, coming for the best of the summer, no work to do, no families to rear. Look at the rooks busy in the fields from dawn to dark, winter and summer, never idle!

But the cuckoo sits all day among the oaks and the crab blossoms and sings, an Idle Countryman. . . .

Swish, pause, swish, short swift sweeps. Suddenly he checked the blade, bent down and tossed something out on to the grit of the lane. It was a yellow-bellied frog. It landed on its back and immediately squirmed over,

sat for a moment eyeing us with ruffled dignity, then gave one prodigious hop which took him into the ditch.

'Can't abear cuttin' a frog, yells like a child they do. Ever 'eard one, master?'

'No.'

'Wors'n pig killin', or an ole 'are.'

A shaft of sunlight lit the hemlock and grass, one sun spot made a round blue disc on Winterface's shirt. The sun was edging round, soon the whole lane would be in its blaze. The scythe would not cut so well then, for the dew would be gone. Early morning is the best time for mowing. In the old days Winterface used to get up before it was light to mow the crops at harvest time and haying. That was way back in Victoria's reign and Teddy's time. Good old days they were, from all accounts . . . memories of stiff stand-up collars and straw hats, the Boer war . . . none of them aplanes abuzzin' and bangin' then!

As long as these little lanes remain so will each succeeding May deck their margins with this flowery harvest. No other wildflower is so typical of Summer England. Those whose work and circumstances take them away from this green island, into the barren deserts and tropical climes, will remember the hemlock and dewy green grass, the spreading hawthorns and the old countrymen, with rosy faces, busy in the ditches. No other country in the whole world can give this cosy intimacy, the delicate scents, the sleepy sounds. As Winterface worked I smelt the keen sweet odours of the cut weeds.

Warwickshire, Hampshire, Wiltshire, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Sussex, Shropshire, Berkshire and Kent. I think especially of these counties this glorious day, loveliness everywhere, in countless villages and lush fields, peace by the slow lily-starred rivers and willow-girt water mills where the trout are rising, lilac in the cottage gardens, men at work in their precious garden plots. And I think too of stately mansions, of those that remain, a few with the old families still in residence, of terraced lawns and gay herbaceous walks, well-stocked kitchen gardens, and chiming stable clocks . . . no wonder England has such lovely daughters.

And so old Winterface will work on in the eye of the sun, he will work until the opposite hedge throws a second longer shade, and then he will put on his coat and 'shoulder' his scythe (shaft under his left arm) and plod back to the village and his waiting wife. There he will eat a prodigious meal, mostly of vegetables of his own growing, and then puffing his pipe of shag, he will visit the Drovers' Arms.

And what of Sperrywell Lane? When all human wanderers are abed, the rabbits will hop out, bats will circle the heavy-headed oaks. Not a footfall will sound upon the lane, certainly no vehicle will disturb its

tranquil peace, for it leads to nowhere in particular. And the light will linger on and on, there will be no darkness save under the thick hedge. Dew will fall to the thirsty grass and that maddening cuckoo will still be calling; not until the first stars shine will he reluctantly seek his perch.

May 26th, 1942. The last entry

So now I come to the last entry in this book; exactly twelve months have passed, the moving shadow has crept round, from late spring to summer, from summer to autumn, from autumn to spring once more.

It is a brilliant morning. Filmy clouds pass swiftly across the upper sky before a strong west wind. From the blossoming chestnut in the meadow comes the purr of a turtle dove, all the birds are in full song.

Late last night I stood up the garden and listened to a song thrush. He sat on a plum spray, dark against the day's end, silhouetted by a grand sunset of mackerel gold and sombre bars of purple cloud. He was singing out of sheer joy and wild delight in living, his beak opening very wide when he uttered the long-drawn full reiterated notes. The fading light shone upon his breast. Birds and men, the only living creatures which sing when their hearts are uplifted.

Looking back, without reference to these scrawlings of mine, what do I remember of the year, what incidents stand out, as Hudson puts it, like sun gleams over a distant expanse of country?

I remember best those summer days when the may flies danced by the Folly; that early morning sun shining on the beech trees in front of the lodge among Scottish hills; the evening I watched the mystic dance of the swallows over the willows, and the last swallow of summer, hawking by the woodside; the snowy nights by the Devil's Staircase, with the turbulent ash-pole lances clashing in the wind; and lastly, more vivid because it is nearer to me in time, that strange wild gloaming at Brock Hall, with the dark manes of the cedar trees rearing against the pale afterlight, and the mysterious whirring coming from the bushes.

I know that another year must pass before these jottings will appear in book form. There is the labour of typing and shaping, correcting galleys and revising proofs, the dull spade work of book-making. Few people realize the labour entailed.

Yet I hope that some of these impressions, a few of these pictures, will be fixed and held in some measure, that a part of the transient beauty, which seemed so patent at the time, will have been ensnared.

I know it may be a vain hope, no mere combination of words can work such magic, unless they be from the pen of some literary giant, such as Hudson or Jefferies. Even then the result can be only mere ghostly reflections of the original impressions or pictures.

It is the same with all the creative arts; painting, poetry, music and sculpture.

This desire to seize and immobilize a passing impression is characteristic of man, something in us longs to hold fast to each beautiful thing, to perpetuate it for all time and all men. We know it can never be, yet we still contrive these foolish things and will do so until the last chapter in our history.

This yearning shows perhaps the best side of our character, something within us enables us to distinguish between beauty and ugliness, and reveals that the only ugliness in the world is within ourselves. The contrast between the inherent beauty of natural things and the baseness of one side of our make-up becomes apparent.

But this I know; as we are swept onwards upon the crest of the wave and at the prime of life, we can at times obtain a glimpse of the goal for which we are striving. The best in us is indestructable, something akin to the sunshine and the wind, to the glitter of rain drops on the leaves, to the joy of a wild bird's swift flight; that other mysterious entity, which, unfettered by time or space, will survive even the crash of pillars and the disintegration of this cosmic world.

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THE OLD HEDGER

*The squire, 'e calls me 'Winterface'
'is lady gies I mittens,
But bless ye, I don't mind the cold
I'm snug as cat wi' kittens!
I likes to smell the tang o' frost
An' feel the turnpike ringin'
Under me 'ob nails, iron 'ard,
An' 'ear the storm cocks singin'.*

*I likes to see them red hedge mice
Wi' eyes like privet berries,
An' bullies, busy in the thorns,
Wi' breasties red as cherries;
A robin kips me company
An' shares me bread an' bacon,
I'd like a photygraph o' 'im,
I'd like our picture taken.*

*Jist 'im an' me, set in the ditch,
Me wi' me pipe an' bacca,
An' Bob a-settin on me spade,
My it 'ud be a smacker!
I reckon some folks pity me
When winter days be dirty,
But fresh air never worried me,
I feels a man o' thirty!*

*I likes to wrastle wi' the thorns
An' see me 'ook a-blinkin'
An' watch them 'ole rooks cummin' ome,
Just when the sun be sinkin',
They're retired, like me, when work be done,
We all packs up together,
Though I've a fire to toast me toes,
An' shelter from the weather.*

*Come June I sharpens up me scythe
An' does a bit o' mowing,
When dew lays long upon the grass
And all the green be growing,
Top o' the year, we allus say,
When meadow sweet be bloomin'
Wi' gix an' nettles shoulder 'igh,
An' turtle doves a-croonin'.*

*My job be 'ard, I don't deny,
But no life could be finer,
I'd rather be an' edger than
A docker, or a miner,
The pay ain't much, but wot o' that?
I allus say it's funny,
The best o' things in life are free,
They can't be bought fer money.*

*An' when me body gits too old
To stand this life o' labour
Please God I don't lie long abed
A burden to me neighbour,
We got to go, but I don't fret,
For while there's life there's laughter;
Passon, 'e knows no more'n Bob,
Wot's cummin' to us arter.*

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